

Another World Survival

Min-maxing
my Support and
Summoning
Magic

3

Author: Yokotsuka Tsukasa

Illustrator: Manyako



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Hanashi
MEDIA



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FIRST YEAR
MIDDLE SCHOOLER
MIA
TAGAMIYA

THIRD YEAR
MIDDLE SCHOOLER
ARISU
SHIMOZONO

THIRD YEAR
MIDDLE SCHOOLER
MIA
RYUKI

FIRST YEAR
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT
SHIKI
YUKARIKO

SECOND YEAR
MIDDLE SCHOOLER
SAKURA
NAGATSUKI



*"Um, Shiki-san, are you
okay touching me for so long,
me being a guy and all?"*

*"Of course not,
but I was worried about you."*

*"Listen up, just close your eyes and be ready...
Welcome back."*

"Ah, it's good to be back."



*“I’m such an idiot.
I should stop being
so stubborn.”*



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ANOTHER WORLD SURVIVAL

MIN-MAXING MY SUPPORT AND
SUMMONING MAGIC

STORY BY YOKOTSUKA TSUKASA

ART BY MANYAKO



Chapter 55: The Mysterious Characters

On the second night in the different world, I wandered through the forest, barely able to stand on my own two feet. Together with my familiar, I had been wandering on my own fighting orcs. I would have been a goner had Tamaki not come running to my aid, saving me at the last moment.

Arisu had been searching for me after I'd secretly left without saying a word.

"Let's find out what's going on. I'm not sure how Arisu feels, so I don't know what we should do yet," she said, vaguely referring to the relationship between Arisu and my nemesis, Shiba.

My heart sank at the thought of the two of them being so close. It was an unbearable ache in my chest.

But Tamaki was very insistent that we stay to figure out what was happening.

"Kazu-san, come on! Let's go to the high school and get to the bottom of this!" Tamaki insisted. Her encouragement pulled me to my feet. She smiled sweetly at me. "It'll be okay, Kazu-san. The Arisu I know is stubborn and headstrong, but she's loyal—loyal to the very end."

※ ※ ※

Tamaki and I left the white chamber and stepped back into the woods. The flashlight in her hand lit up the orcs charging toward us, and the battle resumed.

Thankfully, I wasn't fighting alone this time. Tamaki was here. She was a first-rate swordsman with a swordsmanship rank of 6. The former general's sword in Tamaki's hand danced in the darkness, leaving a trail of silver behind it.

Tamaki slew an orc with every slash from the silver sword. Normal orcs or elites, they didn't stand a chance against her. All I had done in the middle of the battle was to cast the Rank 5 Night Sight spell.

"Oh, wow! It's so bright even though it's nighttime. This is incredible, Kazu-san!" Tamaki was elated, almost bouncing around with joy. Her happiness was infectious, too.

The young woman adjusted to the shadowy atmosphere and shut off her illumination device before continuing to attack like a monster. Before long, I had even improved my level by half.

We visited the pale chamber; however, there was nothing particular to do there, so we hastily disengaged.

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 16	SUPPORT MAGIC 5
SUMMONING MAGIC: 5	SKILL POINTS: 3

"By the way, Rank 6 is amazing," I said. "Heh-heh. I'm the first one with rank 6!" We were so strong that we even had the luxury of having a conversation while fighting.

Tamaki single-handedly obliterated all of the orcs with an impressive display of power, leaving no chance for any of them to escape alive.

After the massacre finished, Tamaki gleefully scooped up all the gems that had been left behind by her foes. These included copious amounts of red gems from earlier in the journey, which she knew were a sign that I had been here before her.

"I probably didn't get them all, but I bet these are spoils from you, right, Kazu? It serves as a good marker," Tamaki said as she tucked away the collected gems.

"Yeah, lots of orcs were surrounding the pillar."

I glanced at the strange object in front of me. What was it? And why had the orcs gathered around it?

"Kazu, did our school have something like this?"

"No idea. I only went to the high school. I'm not that familiar with this place."

"Hmm, I don't think we had anything like this." Tamaki twisted her head and shone her light at the pillar again. "Look. I've never seen this odd pattern before." She gestured to the red design snaking around the pillar directly in front of our faces.

Wait... are those words?

"Language Comprehension."

I focused on the red pattern and activated the magic I got from the Mia Vendor.

"Coordinate Fixation, Space Search, Range Limitation."

"Kazu, what are you talking about?"

"It's what's written here."

"I don't get it."

Me neither, I thought, uneasy.

All I could think of was some kind of instant travel or teleportation. I wanted to go straight to Shiki's place and see what her take on it was, but that had to wait. I shook my head and looked at Tamaki.

"Let's leave figuring this out for later. We should go to the high school first."

"Got it. Leave the small fry on the way to me!"

Tamaki thumped her chest with enthusiasm. She must have underestimated her physical skill rank of 1, as she coughed and spluttered afterwards.

My apprehension was thick in my chest, but having her with me eased my worries. With her swordsmanship at Rank 6 and my summoning magic Rank 5 familiar protecting us, we could take on anyone but a General.

I couldn't help but smile when I saw how overjoyed she was. Just being near her gave me energy. It felt like an illusion that only moments ago I had been aimlessly wandering around the darkness in a dismal mood.

"Thank you again, Tamaki," I said.

"No need to thank me, Kazu-san," she replied, puffing out her chest in faux-innocence, yet it was only a facade. Her seeming naivete was actually a danger.

That same anxiety from earlier came rushing back to me.

"It's all right, Kazu-san! Arisu just can't read the room!" Tamaki said, completely misunderstanding the source of my concern. And Arisu likely wouldn't want her to be saying this to her.

I managed to swallow those words somehow.

Glancing down at my watch, I saw it was past 8 PM. Had I been wandering for two hours? No wonder I had levelled up so much.

Not just Arisu, but Tamaki must've also been worried searching for me before.

I felt awful for worrying her. Shiki, Mia, and the others were probably worried, too.

But we couldn't return to the Cultural Arts Center yet. We still needed to do some things, resolve some stuff.

"Let's go, Kazu-san."

"Yeah."

Tamaki and I headed toward the direction of the high school section.

※ ※ ※

We walked for about thirty minutes in the direction of the high school section, killing a few orcs as we entered the high school grounds.

Tamaki reached Level 13 while on the way, but she held off using her skill points.

We had a romantic moment in the white room on the way to the high school. Tamaki had noticed me trembling, and she'd held me securely. It helped a lot, really. After all, I wouldn't be of any good if my fear paralyzed both my mind and body.

I couldn't thank her enough for relieving that tension.

"I'm happy. I love being able to help you, Kazu-san."

I stroked Tamaki's head. She was so sincere. She was so loyal and seemed like such a puppy.

In return, she narrowed her eyes with a bashful smile.

TAMAKI	
LEVEL: 13	SWORDSMANSHIP: 6
PHYSICAL: 1	SKILL POINTS: 4



I avoided going straight to the high school section of campus, instead taking a detour through the forest. I had dismissed most of my familiars, leaving only two Wind Elementals accompanying me. Having too many creatures along would make more noise as we went through the foliage, in turn making us more noticeable.

Looking at the Wind Elementals' breasts didn't concern me, but for some reason, Tamaki looked sad. She put a hand to her chest and pouted.

"They're bigger than mine..."

"To be quite honest, I believe shape is of greater importance than size," I replied quickly.

"Why are you talking so politely, Kazu?"

"Because conversations like this make me feel embarrassed."

We peered through the foliage at what lay beyond the senior division gate. As expected, we could make out the main school building, surrounded by orcs. It was probably full of them, maybe even a General.

"Kazu, should we attack?" Tamaki looked like she wanted to draw her silver sword.

I shook my head as I thought about hurriedly summoning her scabbard with a Summon Weapon spell at Rank 4 before discarding the sword itself. I could feel my impatience rising. "We need to assess the situation first," I said.

For now, we decided to head towards the boys' dormitory. I had already described to Tamaki the crow's scouting report, and that Shiba and the others had fought against orcs in front of the boys' dorm. Oh, and I also mentioned Shiba's gun.

"You got this, Kazu! If you can manage to survive one shot from his firearm and then strike it, you'll beat them all!"

Tremendously brawn-focused advice came out of her mouth, a reminder that brains are more important. Her vigor is remarkable, but she'll put herself in danger without someone else's guidance—especially now that Arisu, who could employ recovery magic, isn't here with us.

We ventured deeper into the thicket and traversed through the woods, running into a solitary orc twice along our path. I pondered why this creature was out at night and slayed it before moving on. It felt like they were searching for something... or maybe someone who had fled?

Tamaki, who was in the lead, all of a sudden came to an abrupt halt. "Hey, Kazu-san," she said, tense. "Someone's in hiding."

"What makes you think that?"

"It feels just like when we were with Shiki-senpai."

I wondered whether my lack of understanding was because my maximum skill rank was only 5, whereas Tamaki's was 6. Could there be someone with higher reconnaissance skills here, watching us? Could the orcs we took care of have been after that person? I didn't know if they were a friend or a foe—maybe even a student from the high school?

In preparation for combat, I summoned a Wind Elemental and prepared myself.

"Wait a minute," a man's voice whispered from behind some nearby trees.

What? What for?

"There is no reason to fight. I will reveal myself shortly—until then, please refrain from attacking."

"Uh, um, Kazu... san?" Tamaki stared at me in confusion.

I turned to face the direction of the new voice. After I hesitated for a moment, I ordered the Wind Elementals to stand by. At the very least, that voice didn't belong to Shiba. Besides, Shiba didn't talk like that. There was a possibility that this guy was one of Shiba's comrades, but the fact that he approached us meant that there was room for negotiation, at the very least.

The man who appeared from behind the trees was dressed in all black. To be honest, he was dressed like a ninja. "I am playing a role-playing game as a ninja," he said matter-of-factly.

"Well, I can see that, but..." I stared at the man, dumbfounded. I mean, seriously. What was up with this guy?

Chapter 56: The Ninja

If I was to sum up my thoughts on this guy in one word, it would be "ninja." Tamaki stood next to me, perplexed. He was even wearing a ninja outfit...

"It's not good to make too much noise. The orcs will notice us," he said calmly, turning his back on us. "Follow me. We'll talk in the hideout."

We obediently followed without considering whether it was a trap. He moved so swiftly that we had to focus to keep up him, unable to contemplate anything else. Truly, I had to give credit where credit was due—that ninja costume was powerful. It sapped our ability to think of anything else, rendering us completely under its control. It was compelling.

I couldn't tell whether the ninja thing was a joke, but the so-called "hideout" that he mentioned was an old hut in terrible condition. However, when we stepped inside, we got a different picture. It had been properly cleaned up, and four chairs sat around one wooden desk, making the space look almost like a small club room.

We asked our familiars to wait outside while the ninja, Tamaki, and I went inside. He shut the door securely and turned on the flashlight hanging from the ceiling. In the dim light we could read a message: *Welcome to the Ninja Club.*

"Ninja Club?"

"Yes," he needlessly boasted. "I am the head of this group."

"Where are the other club members?"

"There are none. Ninjas are always alone."

U-ummm... but then, does that mean this person is a student from the high school...? Now that I mention it, he doesn't seem too young. Even though he's wearing a mask. Is it a menpo? I don't really understand it, but the mask covers only half of his face. I can still see his eyes.

"Um, if you're a student from the high school... do you know who I am?"

"You are Kazuhisa Kaya, a first-year student at the high school. I know who you are."

My whole body stiffened at that. Tamaki noticed my nervous state and gripped my hand tightly. I watched the ninja walk around the desk to the other side, facing me.

But all he did was deeply bow his head. He'd made a perfect ninety-degree bow.

"I cannot say that I am unaware of the treatment you received in the senior high school. It is clear how you feel toward the other high schoolers, including me. But for now, would you please not act on those feelings?"

I wouldn't, even if they deserved it. Besides, I didn't come to the senior high school to cause trouble right now.

The ninja helped me to a chair, and I gave him a short explanation about us being concerned about what was happening between Arisu and Shiba. I also informed him I generally understood what was going on in the high school through Karasu's reconnaissance.

"I see, Kazuhisa-dono fights with all his might to protect the girl he likes."

"Well, I try. You can call me Kazu. Everyone does."

"Same here! Just call me Tamaki. Nice to meet you, ninja-san!" Tamaki responds cheerfully, appearing to take an immediate liking to him. I found it a little strange how quickly she adapted,

"Understood, Kazu-dono, Tamaki-dono," says the ninja. "It seems that with your abilities, there's nothing for you to be afraid of when it comes to orcs. But I already knew that..."

I cut into the conversation. "Wait a minute. How do you know our current abilities?"

This time, it was the ninja's turn to cock his head.

"The familiar stationed outside is likely a Rank 5 summoning elemental. And since they moved around in absolute darkness, either one of you must have reached Rank 5 in bestowal magic and can use Night Sight. Lady Tamaki's main

skill is swordsmanship, and judging from the way he easily killed the orc earlier, she's at least at Rank 4... maybe even 6? You can observe these things if you pay attention," said the ninja.

Shocked, Tamaki and I exchanged glances. It all sounded reasonable, but it was hard to accept.

"So... ninjas are more than people playing dress-up?" Tamaki remarked bluntly.

The ninja didn't seem to notice the tension in the air. "I've been studying hard to be a top-notch ninja," he said. "When I managed to beat the orc, I found myself transported to a strange white-walled room."

Tamaki asked, "How did you manage to defeat the orc?"

"I strangled it with a rope and tree branch based on the lever principle. I picked up that trick from an assassin."

I couldn't help but wonder how he could have won with such a tactic. And why had he been prepared for that? It was bizarre enough for someone dressed as a ninja to fight something like an orc while still keeping true to his code of honor. Wait, was it even more improbable for an actual man dressed as a ninja to be here at school? Then maybe our magic didn't exist and the orc might have been a real student...

"Kazu, you look dizzy. Watch out, calm down!" Tamaki exclaimed.

"Yeah, I'm okay now. I'm back to my senses." I wiped away the sweat on my forehead, and the ninja produced a heart-shaped handkerchief he had been neatly folding with crisp creases.

There was no point in debating with myself anymore.

"Let's suppose you're actually a real person right now. What level are you?"

"I am Level 9. I have reconnaissance at Rank 3, swordsmanship at Rank 4, and physical fitness at Rank 1."

The ninja exposed his build without hesitation. Maybe he didn't care if people know about it, or maybe he was banking on gaining my trust by revealing his skills.

I was already completely engulfed in this ninja world.

His build was incredibly ninja-like and powerful enough to defeat even an elite orc in a sudden attack. I appreciated his lack of unnecessary fashion accessories often depicted on ninjas these days, but it sure would've been nice if he'd had some throwing weapons like shuriken. *Looks like using swordsmanship skills to throw a dagger is being instead of a specific skill.*

He was able to resist the temptation to cheat with fire or wind magic, like the Fire Release technique and Divine Wind technique, and instead chose a balanced composition of style and strength.

He was methodically increasing his skills, leaving one skill point still at Rank 1. That way we could trust his judgment, including his ability to accurately assess our skill configurations and ranks.

But man, this skill build is nice...

"Kazu, you look happy for some reason."

Oh, Tamaki figured me out. My gamer side must have been showing.

Oh well. I shook my head and turned back to the ninja again. "But with your reconnaissance at Rank 3, Tamaki could detect your presence. Her swordsmanship is at Rank 6."

"That makes sense. If someone has a rank more than double that of my reconnaissance, it stands to reason they'd be able to detect me."

I see. We should exchange information about this kind of thing.

Wait a minute, I'm thinking.

When my comrade had a reconnaissance rank of 1, I had a bestowed magic rank of 3. So if we couldn't find that person... Did that mean this law only applied to those with weapon skills? Could magic rankings sense presence, or did they put us at a disadvantage compared to those who had weapon skill ranks? Ah, if I looked at it that way, it made perfect sense. I needed to test it out later with my familiar; no one else in the Cultural Arts Center group had taken the reconnaissance skill except Shiki. It was too risky having only her try it out. If I could gain information about reconnaissance skills, then I wouldn't

hesitate in offering up information from myself. I wanted Arisu back and to return to the Cultural Arts Center but first, I needed to figure out what steps were necessary for me to take.

"Do Shiba and the others have reconnaissance skills?"

"Shiba Sasou himself does. He probably aims to fight like a sniper."

I figured as much. The skill not only sharpened the user's enemy detection capacity but also allowed them to be detected even if they were sneaking around quietly. According to Shiki, she could tell when she was being watched from afar. It was great for both assassinations and surveillance missions. Apparently, Shiki noticed I was eyeing her chest from far away! What an incredible ability.

"I guess it's gonna be difficult to sneak into the boys' dormitory and grab her arm, yeah?" I sighed dejectedly. That was the easiest way to get Arisu back without delay. If Tamaki's story was correct, then Shiba's people had taken Arisu hostage and possibly even kidnapped her, with Mia's left arm as collateral. Knowing Arisu's kind nature and her disinclination towards weighing possible outcomes, it seemed like a plausible assumption.

We had to remove her shackles and forcefully take Arisu home. Despite the lingering animosity I felt towards Shiba, it wouldn't be wise to fight him now—the high school students were currently organizing themselves, so I hoped they'd be able to defeat the orcs and buy us some time. This had already been discussed during my conversation with Shiki; it wouldn't do us any good to fight them now. What we needed more than anything else was time...

"Hmm, what do you mean by 'grab her arm'? It sounds like code for something else..." the ninja said.

Oh, come to think of it, I haven't told him about it yet.

"One of our allies lost their left arm during the battle with the orcs. It can be reattached later with Rank 4 healing magic since it's been preserved with Stasis, but..."

I briefly recapped our fierce battle with the General, how the party was separated, how our sub-members had retrieved the arm just for Shiba to attack

and take it. Given the situation, Arisu had gone to Shiba to retrieve Mia's arm.

The ninja listened quietly. Even though I couldn't see his face behind his mask, I sensed that his disposition was rapidly souring.

The final blow came when I said, "Fortunately, the girl who lost her is still alive. Mia's behaving cheerfully even without her left arm, but she—"

"Wait a minute! Did you say the name Mia?" The ninja roared loudly like he'd completely forgotten about the pretend scenario, slamming his fist against the desk.

Tamaki and I flinched, but the ninja suddenly regained his composure and scratched the back of his head.

"I-I apologize."

"Um, excuse me, ninja-san. We never got your name...?"

He bowed his head with a sigh. "My name is Yuuki Tagamiya. Please keep the ninja game a secret from Mia..."

Ah. Mia's surname was also Tagamiya. She was searching for her elder sibling at the high school. *Conclusion: the ninja is Mia's brother.*

Tamaki and I stared in awe at the ninja Yuuki Tagamiya. I did think he reminded me of someone. Even though he was a fairly capable person, he had some really disappointing qualities.

Eventually, Tamaki pointed at him and shouted, "Kazu-san, this brother and sister are dangerous! Mia-chan is one thing, but her brother is even worse!"

"Tamaki, let's avoid talking behind people's backs."

I sensed that his desire to keep his appearance a secret from Mia was greater than his yearning to encounter her. I wondered how he usually interacted with his sister, but a part of me also didn't want to know.

"No, no, I'm profoundly thankful that Mia has survived. You all saved her life—I'm very grateful for all you have done," he said.

"That's what I was expecting to hear first, Yuki Tagamiya, the guy who was admitted here after having been caught with an adult video game in elementary

school," I shot back.

"M-Mia said that much..."

Yuki Tagamiya quivered and fell over onto his desk. He was supposedly a third-year at the high school, according to Mia. Why was he dressed as a ninja...?

But in any case, thanks to his ninja act, he was able to make it out alive. Artistically speaking, his skills kept him alive; I suppose I could give him props for that... maybe.

Regardless of whether he acted alone the whole time, he's leveled up to 9. Wait, Level 9...?

"If only we'd had one more level, Kazu-san, we could have saved Mia's desperate move!" Tamaki was getting ready to make the finishing blow on me. *She really doesn't hold back, and she's a natural at it...*

"What do you mean?" Yuuki asked.

I explained Mia's plan to use the tenth level vendor and her own Mia vendor to signal that she was still alive. Yuuki sighed and put his head in his hands.

"I appreciate what Mia is attempting," he said, "but I worked hard to get to Level 9."

"It's only a precaution," I assured him. "Don't worry about it too much."

I had an idea for the man in ninja attire who was so wounded. If he really was Mia's brother, there was no way he'd refuse. "Please help us help Mia with her arm and then if she recognizes you, and we'll assist with your ninja dilemma," I suggested.

"Do I get to refuse?" Yuuki bowed his head towards his desk.

"No, not at all," I replied, grinning.

Chapter 57: Shiba's Deeds

Yuuki, Mia's older brother and a third-year student, had informed me that, until midday today, the high school section was populated by three living student communities. The first was Shiba's boys' dormitory. The other two were the second girls' dormitory and club building. Each group fought on its own, unable to agree with one another for various reasons.

Rumors said that a dictatorship was in place in the first boys' dormitory with Shiba at its head. He had procured a hunting rifle and used it to defeat the orcs and help his followers level up. With this newfound power, Shiba and the five students he followed forced their peers to comply with their orders.

The second girls' dormitory attempted to negotiate with them initially, but those who tried were abducted and made into essentially sex slaves for the boys' dormitory leaders. It was an appalling story, but many of the other high schoolers secretly supported Shiba's actions or even worked alongside him. Some of them even believed that it was what they deserved.

Several members of the sports clubs had apparently levelled up to 1 early on. They were united under the leadership of several sports club teachers. As of the morning of the second day, there were more than ten people above Level 1.

I'm not sure I like it, but I have to admit that they did a great job in defending against the orcs.

"Hold on a moment, ninja-san. What exactly did you mean by midday?"

"I'm referring to an attack that occurred this afternoon. A horde of orcs attacked both the second girls' dormitory and the club building."

That was probably just before I scouted with the crow. The orc army had an estimated one hundred warriors, a few of them being elite orcs. It was just like the situation back at the Cultural Arts Center. We'd had luck on our side and used the terrain to win, but casualties were still high. Unfortunately, they couldn't form a good defensive line at the second girls' dormitory or the club

building. Without key players like Arisu and Tamaki, we wouldn't have been able to keep the elite orcs from roaring, even if we'd beaten them.

In reality, the enemy was incomparably powerful, and the students who'd resisted were met with a merciless slaughter.

Confused, Tamaki asked, "But why didn't the orcs go to the first boys' dormitory?"

"The people from the first boys' dormitory led the orcs to two other locations," came the reply.

"Hold on a second. That means..."

"Shiba used his subordinates to lure the orcs to two resistance points and crush anyone who didn't follow him. In gaming terms, it's like a train. It's nothing short of a nuisance."

No, it's far worse than that; it's more like...

I felt sick. The fact that someone like me, who had tried to kill Shiba the day before, could feel this disgusted... It was incredible.

Tamaki clearly did not understand and raised her eyebrows in confusion. I explained a train was a strategy where everyone rushed forward in a line to overwhelm in the enemy.

"Wait, wait! But everyone who survived is our ally. Why would he want to make their lives harder? That's not right, right?"

"It isn't strange, Tamaki. To be honest, Shiki and I had thought about the possibility of someone engaging in such behavior," I replied.

"Shiki-san...?"

"She knows Shiba pretty well too. She said it wouldn't surprise her if he pulled something like this."

It was because of that possibility that we were cautious about making contact with the high school. Crushing anyone who gets in his way is something Shiba was easily capable of. After all, I suffered a terrible fate as a result of touching his sensitive spot. I wandered the depths of hell.

Yuuki-senpai seemed to understand. He groaned and crossed his arms beneath his ninja mask.

"Due to Shiba's interference, two out of three bases were destroyed by early afternoon. Some survivors managed to escape and hid in multiple spots in attempt to stay away from Shiba or any orcs. I worked diligently to help connect these bases and aid their hiding process," he said. "Excluding those who went to Shiba's side, there are about twenty people who survived. There are probably three or four people who are Level 1 or higher among them."

Should we think of that as more than we expected—or less? That number will decrease even further from now on. Can they survive the night?

"How many people are with Shiba now?" I asked.

"There are about fifty people, including the girls who are treated like slaves."

That was a lot. It was hard to know how many were at higher levels, but regardless, that was more people than we'd fought at the Cultural Arts Center. I hoped these people wouldn't oppose us, but I knew there was no way that'd happen. Not just because Shiba was in charge—even if he wasn't actively there, they'd still act similarly. His dominance had poisoned them.

Still, it'd be great if they'd left us alone. They could defeat the orcs in the high school section. The enemy of my enemy was my friend.

However, Shiba had laid his hands on Arisu. He'd provoked us. He'd threatened Shiki with a gun and took Mia's arm, probably to blackmail us with it later.

He'd crossed the line.

To be honest, I wanted to kill him right now. I wanted to summon my familiars with all my might and head straight to the boys' dormitory to slaughter Shiba and the surviving students and teachers.

Then, we'd take back Arisu.

That would be so great.

But that wasn't the prudent option. Instead, we'd try negotiating first, even if it resulted in failure. Meanwhile, I planned on us acting in secret, ready to strike

quickly should things go south. That seemed like the best course of action for now, although there were several other strategies we could pursue.

I detailed the plan to the two of them, and they both agreed. Surprisingly, it was Yuuki who was particularly motivated. He wanted to be the one to secretly retrieve Mia's left arm.

"As her big brother, I at least want to do that much," he said with a laugh. "Leave it to me." He added, "There's someone inside the first boys' dormitory who's a spy. I'll contact them and we'll outsmart Shiba together."

"Hey Kazu-san, what's a spy actually do?" Tamaki asked.

"You know, undercover stuff."

Aha! The first boys' dormitory group *wasn't* completely unified. We could exploit that and make use of a spy... Yuuki was pretty good at coming up with plans, even though his appearance and way of speaking were a bit off—okay, no, it was super weird.

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Our plan came to nothing. As we walked towards the boys' dormitory, we heard the clashing of a battle up ahead.

We looked at one another.

Even though it was late, Yuuki had equipped everyone with night vision goggles, so we could see one another's faces in the dark.

Furthermore, he'd applied all possible enhancements to my accompanying magic. He had given the ninja outfit a Hard Armor enchantment, and the various ninja weapons had also been enchanted with Hard Weapons. To top it off, he summoned a long sword using Summon Weapon and gave it the Hard Weapon enchantment.

"There are many orcs," Yuuki noted thanks to his reconnaissance skills. He'd listened for signs of them for a while. There was a bellowing roar that could be heard from far away.

Whoa, there must be some powerful enemies among them.

"I believe there are about one hundred of them," he said.

"Um, would the first-year boys' dormitory be easy to protect?" I tried to recall the area around there as best I could. Could we predict where and when they'd attack so that we could set up obstacles such as trenches or ditches to slow them down? It was worth considering.

However, when I asked Yuuki about it, he told me no, as I feared.

"They focused on disrupting other bases during the day and seemed to be busy leveling up individually."

Now I understood. The time I saw Shiba was not at the first-year boys' dormitory but near the second-years' quarters. *I guess they went on a business trip and started hunting orcs, but then that means...*

I bit my lip.

No, it was fine if the high school base was wrecked.

Karma would determine whether Shiba would be punished. But Arisu was probably already there, standing firm at the front of the fight. During the daytime battle, Shiki and I had shouted advice to keep her from being surrounded by enemies. Even in the case of a charge that might lead to her being surrounded, we'd aimed for a timing where there would be no organized counterattack after causing confusion among the enemies.

Arisu and Tamaki always had reliable allies by their side. Mia and I were always in a position to provide support. Now it was nighttime; the magical aid I gave must have long since worn off. Would it be impossible for Arisu now, alone, to stop the horde of orcs?

"I'm going to help her," I declared without hesitation.

Arisu's smile flickers through my mind. I smile weakly to myself, realizing that I really do like Arisu.

"I don't care about Shiba or the high school anymore. I'm just gonna worry about helping Arisu. I've got this!"

"Same here," Tamaki chimed in. "I don't really understand complicated things, but I can do anything if it's to help Arisu!"

"Indeed. Good, leave Mia's arm to me," Yuuki said. "I'll try to take advantage of the chaos. If I succeed, I'll launch fireworks as a signal. Stay alert!"

We nodded at each other and start to move.

Yuuki splits off from us to sneak into the back of the first-year boys' dormitory. Tamaki and I climb a small hill near the orcs. From the peak, we observe the square before the dormitory. It was packed with orcs. A barricade of desks and chairs stood at the entrance to the dorm, lit up by fluorescent lamps atop them. Generators powered them, and students thrust objects and spears at the orcs from behind it. In the midst of all this commotion, a small girl with a spear created chaos beyond the barricade.

It was Arisu.



Every time Arisu swung her spear, she wiped out multiple orcs. With each thrust of her weapon, an orc died. Her unparalleled combat skills left an ever-growing gap in the horde's front lines. But there would come a point when even Arisu could no longer keep up with the onslaught. When that happened, they wouldn't be able to resist the enemy's overwhelming forces any longer.

Behind the orc army that was now the vanguard, there were several elite orcs who served as commanders. To make matters worse, there were even hellhounds. Every single one of the generals was present.

The enemy had committed fully. Without Arisu, the first-year boys' dormitory would fall in an instant.

No, even if Arisu was here...

"Let's go, Tamaki."

"Leave it to me, Kazu-san!"

I called forth my familiar and cast buff spells on them. This time, I summoned four Rank 5 Fire Elementals. A naked man covered in flames appears, with only his head and lower body visible. He held a curved sword and gave off a slightly Middle Eastern vibe.

With that done, my MP dropped to 60.

But that was enough. It was all I'd need.

I cast Deflection Spell to spread it out, then gave Keen Weapon, Physical Up, Mighty Arm, and Resist Elements: Fire to Tamaki, myself, and the four Fire Elementals. I cast Clear Mind on myself and Tamaki. Lastly, I used Deflection Spell again and cast Haste. A red light enveloped us, my remaining MP dropping to 23.

"Charge!"

We all rushed down the hill and dived into the side of the orc horde.

The battle in the dead of night begins.

It was a battle to save Arisu.

Chapter 58: Battle at the Boys' Dormitory in the High School Division

We created a wedge with Tamaki in the lead and me slightly behind her while Four Fire Elementals guard me. Tamaki charged into the orc squad without hesitation. Her swordsmanship Rank of 6 combined with her skills made her an unstoppable force against even the elite orcs. She was so focused on eliminating them that she sometimes got carried away and ran too far ahead, leaving me behind.

I lost sight of Tamaki—the orcs in the way—and I couldn't help her at this point no matter how much the Fire Elementals shielded me. The Fire Elementals blazed against the orcs, forming a way for me to move ahead. Fortunately, even with the flames all around me, my resistance to fire kept me from harm.

I guess it's like the friendly fire setting in an MMORPG. Our team has got the upper hand.

I leaped forward through the burning figures, leveling up suddenly, and entered a white room.

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There were only two people in the white room: me and Tamaki. If Arisu had stayed on those front lines, she should've been here too, but as expected, she had already left.

Anyway, never mind that.

"Hey Tamaki," I said as I caught up with her. "You keep walking ahead too much."

"Ahh, sorry." Tamaki put her hands together and smiled nervously. It was hard to tell if she meant it or not; she tended to act before thinking.

"It's okay most of the time, like when Arisu is around. She's always got your back."

"I know, I know. I'm always being taken care of by Arisu. I'm so grateful for her—more than anyone else. Maybe I cherish her even more than you do."

Arisu and Tamaki had a strong bond, and it sometimes seemed like they were inseparable. For some reason, it made me feel left out. That shouldn't stop me from trying to win Arisu's heart, though. And if that happened, I wouldn't let go of Tamaki either.

It may have been selfish and hurtful, but we didn't have any other choice if we wanted things to remain the same between us. We needed to depend on each other completely, because both Tamaki and I were weak humans.

Yes, I realized it through this incident.

I realized how weak I truly was, and that by myself, I couldn't accomplish anything. But, for Arisu's benefit, my own welfare and even Tamaki's, I wouldn't stand locked in place any longer.

I glanced sternly at Tamaki.

"It'd be terrible if you collapsed before we reunite with Arisu. You may have your strength right now, but we don't have a healer. Arisu has always protected our backs, but she isn't here. Don't ruin our synchronization with the Fire Elemental—got it?"

"I understand, Kazu-san!" she replied eagerly.

Ahh... she's always so full of energy. I sighed.

Without touching my abilities, I pressed the *Enter* key and returned to our starting point.

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 17	SUPPORT MAGIC: 5

SUMMONING MAGIC: 5	SKILL POINTS: 4
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Tamaki returned from the white room and sliced through the sea of orcs blocking our path with ease. Once we regrouped, we pressed forward, keeping a keen eye on Arisu’s direction. The tall Fire Elemental pointed to her every time we asked, and occasionally, I requested that it jump up to check our surroundings. However, a massive black dog—a Hellhound—blocked our path, coming at us from the front, exactly where we were heading for Arisu.

I panicked at the thought of Arisu getting hit by the Hellhound’s breath if we didn’t take care of it now, since our fire resistance didn’t affect her at the moment.

"Tamaki, we have to move fast."

"Yes, sir!"

Immediately I activated the Deflection Spell and Haste, and everyone was engulfed in a red hue. Together, we pushed through the huge hoard of orcs. Tamaki went first while the Fire Elemental widened the gap. I followed them and positioned another Fire Elemental to our rear to keep an eye on anyone following us.

Along the way, Tamaki leveled up once. I asked her to save her skill points. I wanted her to quickly raise her swordsmanship rank to 7. If she reached rank 7, she would be able to fight a General evenly.

We quickly left the white room.

TAMAKI	
LEVEL: 14	SWORDSMANSHIP: 6
PHYSICAL: 1	SKILL POINTS: 6

Once Tamaki made it to Level 14, the orcs were no match for her. They suffered heavy losses and began to retreat in fear. Plus, our surprise attack from the side was a huge success. The enemy army was caught in a pincer attack from two directions.

And finally, what we had been waiting for lay in wait ahead.

The first-year boys' dormitory lit up with a display of dazzling colors and loud bangs as fireworks ignited. These rockets, normally purchased from convenience stores, practically broke through the night sky of two moons in this parallel dimension.

A man dressed in ninja garb stood at the center of the show and held something that looked like a stick or baton high above his head.

I guessed it was Mia's arm.

Thanks, Yuuki-senpai!

Although I couldn't help but wonder why he was doing a pose reminiscent of Spider-Man.

All that remained was...

The orcs, perplexed by the fireworks, grew more and more chaotic. The creatures started to run away in fear. Suddenly, a space cleared between them and us. Arisu came into view and her eyes widened when she saw us coming near. I directed my gaze straight at her and shouted with all of my might, "Arisu, come back!"

I took off running towards Arisu despite Tamaki's frantic cries. I'd just scolded her for being careless, but the moment I saw Arisu in danger, all my worries for my safety evaporated. Making use of my Physical Up and Haste abilities, I sprinted through the crowd of orcs, who were rooted to the spot as I darted around them toward Arisu.

That was when I realized that a Hellhound had broken its way through the orc battalion. Its throat was expanding like a balloon, a sign that it was about to unleash its breath attack. *This is bad—it's coming!*

"Arisu!" I wrapped my arms around her and was met with a wave of blistering heat. Even amidst the searing flames, I managed to keep a smile on my face as I watch Arisu shrink in my arms.

"K-Kazu... san..."

"We've got Mia's arm. Come back to us," I pleaded.

"B-But... why would you...?"

"I want you to come back with me!"

She gasped. "O-okay!"

Just then I heard the thunderous roar of a Hellhound racing toward us. Its giant paws pounded against the ground, and it leaped toward me. In the midst of the chaos, I turn to Arisu once more and offered her one final request: "Let's form a party."

She responded without hesitation, "Yes."

I cherished that quiet voice. I nodded at her.

At the same time, Tamaki jumped from the pack of orcs and soared into the sky. She met the Hellhound midair, striking its body with her silver sword. The impact was powerful enough to send the three-meter-long beast flying away. Tamaki landed on her feet and rushed it. She leveled her blade at its neck as it attempted to right itself.

The silver sword sliced off the demon dog's head.

I marveled at her agility and the strength behind her sword swings. Even with Haste enabled, she must have put her own power behind each swing. *It's not just her sword—Tamaki's skills are amazing.*

Then I heard the familiar chime that notified me of a level-up. I'd become Level 18.

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A white room. There were three of us there: myself, Tamaki, and Arisu.

Arisu looked at us, her face twisted by anxiety. Tamaki went toward her, embracing her tightly while murmuring, "Arisu, you idiot! I was so worried!"

"T-Tamaki-chan... I'm sorry," she replied quietly as Tamaki nuzzled her cheek against hers. Arisu let out a small chuckle at Tamaki's motherly affections.

Approaching them slowly, I called out to Arisu. Her eyes met mine, and she hesitated briefly before I spoke up again, my voice soft.

"Welcome back," I said.

"Um... Kazu-san, why are you here?" Arisu asked.

"Let's just say a lot's happened," I replied, keeping calm.

She didn't understand. She looked me directly in the eye as she asked, "What happened while I was away?"

I took a deep breath and replied, "Arisu, I saw you meeting with Shiba inside the Repel Sphere."

The realization hit her like a ton of bricks. Her face drained of color.

"No, that wasn't what it looked like. Shiba promised he would return Mia-chan's arm if I went with him—he said he would help us fight the General," Arisu explains hastily.

Now I understood the situation, but would he keep his promise? Probably. I had to admit Shiba was awful, but he never broke his promises, which is what made him so sly. People who accepted his offers soon became dependent on him. In a way, it was like being addicted to drugs.

Arisu was falling into that trap.

Fortunately, that trap is breaking—thanks to me.

"Everything's okay now. We can forget all of that." I cupped her cheek in my hand and raised her head until she looked me in the eyes. I saw her tears welling up.

We kissed passionately, locked in an embrace, right in front of Tamaki.



I took a step away, and Arisu's eyes immediately popped open. Her cheeks were beet red.

"Kazu-san, I..." She trailed off, failing to hide her embarrassment.

"You belong to me—forever."

"Yes," she whispered back weakly.

I shifted my gaze to Tamaki; she looked uneasy. I stroked her hair softly with my hand.

Arisu watched this, obviously confused.

I've gotta explain everything. If I don't, all of our secrets will remain hidden forever.

I told them both the good and the bad: how I'd stumbled through the forest in desperation, killing every orc my path crossed with. How Tamaki ultimately saved my life. And then I told Arisu everything that happened afterward.

Once I was finished, Arisu said, "It's all my fault."

"No, it's because my heart's weak," I said.

As I wrapped my arms around the two of them, I could feel their warmth and smell their sweet scents.

"I need you both. Please, love me, too." It was a selfish thing to say, but maybe it was necessary for us at this moment. We couldn't make it alone anymore.

We had scraped by several times today when our lives were in danger. We'd made it through thanks to our faith in one another. I'd do whatever I could to strengthen that bond.

Of course, it was also to cover up my own weakness. I had been at my worst when I saw Arisu and Shiba's secret meeting. I never thought I was so fragile. If only I could have thought a little more calmly, I wouldn't have jumped to the worst possible conclusion. But that just wasn't me. I had to accept my own faults and figure out how to account for them. For that, I needed Arisu and Tamaki. I couldn't do it alone.

Once I understood that, it was just a matter of their own feelings. And so, the two girls glanced at each other before they turned to me and nodded in unison.

"We belong to you, Kazu-san," Arisu said first.

"We'll give ourselves to you together," Tamaki added.

"We have to make up for each other's weaknesses, little by little," Arisu said.

"Yeah, you're right. I'm weak. I'll break without you, but I can't just leave that weakness alone," I said.

"We'll support you. We'll always be here for you," Tamaki declared as they both linked arms with me.

I kissed each of them on the cheek before tightly holding them in one passionate embrace within the white room.

Chapter 59: I Choose Summoning Magic for Everyone's Sake

Arisu explained to me what Shiba Sasou meant to her. Initially, she was hesitant to share details, but I pushed her until she agreed to give me the whole story. I needed to know about him. I had to know everything about the man I hated with such bloodthirsty intensity, so I could make a decision.

"I've told you before that I'm adopted," Arisu explained. "The family that took me in, well, their relationship fell apart soon after. But my cousin, who lived nearby, was always there for me. That was Shiba. He said that if I became his follower, he'd make sure I was never lonely. He'd pat my head and hold me tight... He helped me feel safe."

Ah, I get it. I understand now. How typical of him.

Shiba was a passionate leader to those in his circle, but he despised anyone who fell outside of it. His cult of personality helped ensure the smooth running of his organization from those around him who admired him so much.

I didn't agree with the structure he built, so I voiced my opinion and was met with an icy stare. The rest, as they say, was history.

"My parents put a lot of trust in my cousin. He promised that if I attended the same school as him, his family would pay for it. He said I'd be safe if I stayed with him. He was always so kind. When I got to the school, though, I decided to make my own way. I wanted to prove that I could be independent and not rely on others too much. That's all I wanted..."

Arisu dropped her gaze. Her voice turned soft. "I knew he was being arrogant at school, relying on his parents' influence to do what he wanted. I pretended not to notice. Kazu, I'm guilty, too..."

I lightly combed Arisu's hair with my fingers and encouraged her to go on. She glanced up at me, and I saw the tears about to fall from her eyes. "Kazu, I know

you don't hate me. That's why I can tell you about this."

Arisu hesitated before continuing. She said that she used to see Shiba about once a month and that he seemed to care about her in some way. She was a cute and modest girl who admired him and listened to everything he said, always behaving like the perfect family member. And in return, he acted like the perfect older cousin.

Their connection remained even when Shiba moved on to high school. Of course, Arisu was too young to go with him. Still, he would visit the middle school every so often to check in with her and offer her small presents.

On the surface, it was the ideal relationship. At first glance, they seemed like very close cousins. That's how it should have ended. Arisu had been ignoring his darker side for a long time.

Everything changed yesterday evening in the white room, after Arisu and I had just slept together. When I asked her about his name, she became anxious and threatened. She was afraid that I might find out about her ties to Shiba.

"Thanks to you, Kazu, we were able to free ourselves from the Cultural Arts Center. It hurts to think you might start to hate me, but so be it. It's my fault. But if we all turn our backs on each other... everyone will die. Tamaki will die. So that's why I'll entrust Tamaki to you, Kazu." Arisu glanced away, embarrassed. Well, umm, luckily, Tamaki-chan seems to get along with Kazu-san..."

I pinched Arisu's cheek with my fingers and pulled. "Tamaki."

"Yeah, leave it to me!" Tamaki pinched Arisu's other cheek and pulled it in the opposite direction. "On the count of three, let go. One, two, three!"

With a snap, Arisu's cheeks turned bright red. "Owww!" she cried.

"That was your punishment, Arisu," Tamaki scolded. "You didn't have to worry. I already had a good impression of Kazu-san. If you'd just talked to him directly, he would have understood how we both felt."

Tamaki said exactly what was on my mind, but I was also at fault here. I said something cruel, like if Arisu left me, I would be willing to take my own life and drag Tamaki along. That was too far. To make matters worse, when I saw Arisu

with Shiba, I let my imagination run wild. Even though it was flashbacks from the past that provoked me into panic mode, my fragile heart was my own fault.

I needed help overcoming my shortfalls. Despite how embarrassing it was, I had to rely on Arisu and Tamaki.

"Well, now we don't have any more secrets from each other."

"R-right."

"Or is there still something you're hiding?"

"U-um... there's hardly anything." Arisu blushed and turned away.

"What, there's still more?"

"Well, um... it's not necessary to share this..."

"A-ri-su! No secrets allowed!" Tamaki blurted out.

"But, but... okay, but only for Tamaki-chan's ears."

Arisu and Tamaki stepped away and whispered to each other, leaving me feeling lonely and sighing with frustration. When they returned, Tamaki was giggling, and Arisu had tears streaming down her face as she clung to the fabric of Tamaki's gym uniform.

"Hey, Kazu-san, you've got to hear this!"

"Nooo, Tamaki-chan! I told you not to tell anyone!"

"It's fine. Kazu-san won't be mad at us."

Ah, I had a feeling about what was going on. When I saw Arisu blushing and covering her mouth with her hand while looking in my direction, I couldn't help but make assumptions.

"You know, Kazu-san. Earlier today at lunch... Arisu was dying to do it with you."

"Okay, enough of that. Let's keep this between us." I placed my hand on Tamaki's head and gave it a light pat. "We should respect each other's privacy even when we're not supposed to keep secrets."

"Yeah, got it!" Tamaki nodded cheerfully. Arisu covered her face with her hands and scrunched up in embarrassment.

Changing the subject, we moved on to our meeting before leaving the white room. I outlined our general plan for what we should do next.

Neither of them had any objections.

"Well then, I'll cast the summoning spell."

KAZU	
LEVEL: 18	SUPPORT MAGIC: 5
SUMMONING MAGIC: 5 → 6	SKILL POINTS: 6 → 0

We pressed the return key and returned to our original location.

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We made a beeline for the battlefield. Intent on taking down the band of orcs, we attacked as soon as possible. The orcs were in disarray, and we took advantage of that to thin out their numbers. *Big thanks to the higher-ranking members for awarding us hefty experience points, by the way.*

Arisu and Tamaki stood together at the forefront. I summoned two Fire Elementals next to me and sent two more to join those on the frontline.

Tamaki's level had increased in no time at all. We checked her stats in the white room, and found that she was now Level 15. She had eight Skill Points available which she used to increase her swordsmanship to Rank 7 and her physical skill to 1.

Arisu had slain six more orcs, reaching Level 15 and an experience point difference of 120 from Tamaki. She increased her healing to 4, hoping to mend Mia's arm with it, and still had five skill points remaining to increase her spear

skill to 6. We quickly left the white room as the orcs' morale faded away and they scattered in disarray.

And then, as if replacing the small-fry orcs, a giant man with dark skin that seemed to melt into the darkness appeared. In his hand was a sword with a brilliant silver shine.

It was a General Orc.

Beside him, a Hellhound was on standby. Was there only one of these beasts? This *was* the General we were concerned about, right? He wasn't present earlier, instead saved as a reserve, ready to deal with the high school's organized resistance.

Would we have been attacked by the General and his forces if we hadn't assaulted the middle school's main building tonight? Would we have become stronger before this fight had we not attacked earlier?

Ah, well. I shook my head. Right now, our formidable enemies were right before us. I immediately cast Clear Mind on Arisu.

The General Orc roared loudly in response. But neither Arisu nor Tamaki flinched; they looked to me calmly even though only hours ago we were struggling together against this same enemy.

"Tamaki, you take on the General by yourself. You can do it. Arisu, handle the Hellhound."

"Understood, Kazu-san."

"Yep, got it."

The General and Hellhound started running towards us.

I surrounded Arisu with a shield of Flame Resistance Magic. She flew forward and charged at the Hellhound. Tamaki rushed ahead to engage the General.

Arisu stayed calm even as flames from the Hellhound engulfed her body. With precision, she struck the creature's front paws several times, leaving severe wounds in the process. The Hellhound howled in pain and attempted to escape, but Arisu quickly closed the gap between them and kept up her relentless attacks.

Although my magic was not very strong, Arisu overwhelmed them with her martial prowess. It was a fight full of intense passion. I hoped that my watching from behind somehow had a positive impact on her success.

"Arisu, use the Fire Elemental! Work together with me!"

"Right!"

I ordered two of my Fire Elementals to engage the Hellhound. The Hellhound's flames are like a light caress to my elementals, but enough to draw their attention and throw them off balance.

Arisu and the others soon gained an advantage over the orcs. Tamaki bravely stepped up and faced the General head-on. Seeing her sword drawn, the General grinned fearlessly and retaliated with his own weapon.

The Tamaki who was inexperienced this morning is nowhere to be seen. She now fought as skillfully as the most powerful orc of them all. At every strike, fiery sparks filled the air.

The sword duel that unfolded before us was breathtaking. Tamaki and the General seemed deadlocked in terms of strength, but my spell had given Tamaki an extra edge in agility. Gradually, their battle began to tip in her favor until both of them moved seemingly as one and thrust their weapons forward.

The clash ended with a single fatal blow from each warrior; Arisu's spear impaling the Hellhound's throat and Tamaki's silver sword finding its way into the General's chest. The creatures let out one final cry of anguish before disappearing from sight.

"We won, Kazu-san! I did it on my own!" Arisu declared triumphantly.

"Great work, Kazu-san! We're even stronger!" Tamaki added with a broad grin. They both faced me, full of admiration.

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The thrill of the fight slowly subsided. The three of us and our four familiars turned around, and the high school students gawked at us in awe. It was

understandable—we had just joined Arisu in her fight against the orc army and won with relative ease.

They probably didn't know what was going on. One of them took notice of me. He pointed at me and said something to the others around him. He seemed puzzled as to why a bullied high schooler like me was with the middle schoolers. He was aware that I wasn't exactly friendly. Confusion spread among the high school students. That was when a scream rang out.

"What the hell?!" Shiba came out in front of the unstable barricade. He was holding a shotgun, and his voice was trembling. Maybe he was shaken, unsure of what to do now that plans had changed. Perhaps Shiba couldn't move without complete certainty. After all, the General's appearance had thrown him for a loop.

It was obvious to me now that nothing ever went according to plan. That was the lesson I learned over the past two days. Shiba found out the hard way, too; he tried to control the orcs as if they were humans and failed miserably. We even ended up cleaning up his mess. He must have felt incredibly embarrassed and shocked.

I had a sudden realization about why Shiba so harshly punished those who didn't listen to him, including me in the past. Maybe it was his fear of something that he couldn't manage coming back to haunt him.

"Arisu, why are you staying by his side? Come back here!" he barked.

Arisu slowly shook her head in response. She held my hand tightly while Tamaki had hold of the other. Then, I noticed my body trembling; was I having another panic attack?

But this time was different. I had Arisu and Tamaki here with me.

Arisu shook her head. "No, I refuse. I'll fight with Kazu-san and everyone from the Cultivation Center."

"Are you sure? What if your friends don't measure up to the task...?"

"Well, umm... n-ninja..." was all I could manage to mumble.

Arisu looked up at me, a little confused. *Yeah, it's hard to believe in ninjas if you haven't seen them with your own eyes, but they're here. It's true.*

"Anyway, I'm not going to stay here with you anymore! I'm determined to go back to middle school!" Arisu shouted.

"Don't be foolish! You belong to me! You're not some loser's possession. Come back now, Arisu!"

"Kazu-san is not a loser!" Arisu's voice boomed as she held onto my hand and stood proudly. "Kazu-san deserves credit for helping us liberate the Cultural Arts Center. Most of those living in the middle school were saved thanks to him. Kazu-san's leadership kept around thirty people alive, too. Plus, we became strong enough to defeat even elite soldiers, and we were able to best the General. And of course, there's the success against the Hellhounds we faced—all made possible by Kazu-san's hard work. No one else could have achieved this."

Arisu released my hand and steps forward, looking around at the mesmerized high schoolers.

"While you were busy trying to crush other factions at lunch today, we went to the girls' dorm and rescued the people who were being held captive. After that, we repelled an attack by a hundred orcs. And in the evening, we went to the main building of the middle school and defeated the general. Kazu-san was in charge of all these operations. If anyone dares to look down on Kazu-san, they'll have to go through me first. Come out and face me."

The scene fell silent.

No one said a word. Only rough breathing echoed through the square. Eventually, the first to break the silence was Shiba.

"I won't acknowledge it!" he shouted, pointing his shotgun at me. He seemed to be in a terrible state of agitation.

I was dumbfounded.

Was Shiba Sasou really such a narrow-minded person? Was he really so thoughtless?

Was it because our actions were so unexpected?

Was our fight, Arisu's, Tamaki's and mine, enough to overturn all of his calculations?

I considered the situation with a calm demeanor. Just a few hours ago, the General had nearly destroyed us, and now here we were again, but this time without Mia, and we so easily defeating that enemy.

But Shiba, I owe it all to your actions involving Arisu, my impulse to level-up irresponsibly, and Tamaki's decision to join me in spite of the recklessness. Cause and effect come full circle. You probably thought your actions were so logical. You had no way of knowing I was watching.

My recklessness had ruined all of his predictions, as had Tamaki's devotion and Arisu's unwavering feelings.

And now, as I struggled to get the nerve to kill Shiba—he was almost completely unguarded—he thought we were no match for him.

He raised his gun at me without hesitation.

I felt an absurd impulse to laugh at the situation. Arisu and Tamaki tried to step in front of me, but I prevented them with a wave of my hand.

"Go ahead and shoot," I said, trying not to show my fear. I took one step forward, leaving the Fire Elementals behind me, as this was something only I could finish. No matter how weak and defenseless I may have been, placing all my hopes on the woman I loved as I cowered in the shadows, now was the time for me to act, if only for the last time.

"Just try and see if your scattergun has any effect on me anymore. See if you can still control me with your power, but I'll warn you—I'm much stronger than you," I dared.

"I'll do it! I'll shoot!"

"Go ahead!" I shouted from deep down inside me.

Shiba screeched and jerked the trigger hard. It seemed like time had come to a standstill. As soon as I realized, I yelled without hesitation, "Reflection!" A fan-shaped, multicolored thin barrier appeared before me and reflected the bullets

back at Shiba. His own scattered bullets pierced his body and sent him flying backward into the fortification.

"He attacked Shiba! Get him!" The subordinate students all rushed in my direction. They threw flaming arrows, stones, anything they could get their hands on. But before they reached me, I used magic again.

"Transposition!"

The Rank 6 summoning magic Transposition was a powerful tool that could easily exchange positions between oneself and an ally. Even familiars were not exempt from this spell. The effective range was roughly five meters per rank, but I managed to push it as far as thirty meters away. There were numerous uses for this magic beyond just emergency evasion; however, that was exactly what I was doing in this case. Without hesitation, I cast the spell and switched places with the Fire Elemental that had lagged behind me.

Despite taking attacks from multiple low-level students, the Fire Elemental remained completely calm, effortlessly shrugging off each hit. The students' panicked expressions were amusing to behold.

I shook my head at myself. This was no good. The high schoolers were an important fighting force.

Did I hate them? Yes, I loathed them. I still wanted them to die, but now was not the time for such grand carnage. It would be a waste of energy to slaughter all those students. They could at least serve as a threat against the orcs at the high school. With that, we could make our move elsewhere.

After all, there were only about thirty students, including the ones we rescued today, at the Cultural Arts Center. It would take another day just to liberate all the middle schoolers.

And surely, that wasn't the main event.

There had to be something beyond the forest, where the orcs took some of the students.

If the high schoolers could buy some time...

But I looked at Shiba with cold eyes. He was half-dead from taking those bullets.

"Arisu," I said. "I'm going to kill Shiba. He's directly responsible for hurting the people at the Cultural Arts Center. He's the only one who's dangerous."

"You're right," Arisu replied confidently. "But I'll do it."

"No, I'll do it. You just watch."

This was something that only I could do. Shiba tried to flee, dragging his wounded body away. Then he suddenly vanished—a nuisance of a reconnaissance power. His strategy of combining shooting and reconnaissance skills made him an especially formidable foe if left unchecked. I had to finish him here and now.

I called back the two Fire Elementals and summoned an Iron Golem, my newest and strongest golem, with the Rank 6 Summoning Magic at my disposal.

The looming three-meter-tall steel giant advanced toward the barricade. As it did, the students screamed in terror and sprinted away. They weren't the targets of this scene.

I gave orders to the Iron Golem. It drummed its feet on the ground, causing a violent tremor that rattled the barricade apart. From the darkness, Shiba emerged, clutching a shotgun in his hands. He was cut off from his peers and too petrified to escape; he merely stood there screaming, and then we were alone with him. I commanded my Iron Golem once again, and it delivered a crushing fist directly at Shiba's body. The sound of his flesh tearing was enough to mark the close of my revenge in an anticlimactic manner.

We traveled back to the white room; Tamaki had leveled up. Ah—at last, my question was answered: killing humans of level 1 or higher granted experience points.

Chapter 60: End of Day 2

Shiba was dead. I'd killed him, but I didn't feel as emotional as I thought I would. I wasn't surprised that I'd taken a life. All I had was a long sigh and thoughts of *It's done*.

All I did was fulfill my duty. When a comrade died at noon, it was much more shocking—Akane Shimoyamada, the girl who trusted me and died for me. If it was to prevent victims like her, I could become more heartless.

I killed Shiba to protect the Cultural Arts Center, and strangely enough, that feeling was much stronger than my hatred for Shiba. In my mind, these past two days had become bigger than everything that had happened before in my life—except for the low points of when I was panicked or when Arisu was taken. I didn't know if that was good or bad.

For some reason, I'm happy. I'm happy I'm spending more time reflecting on Akane Shimoyamada's death than my hatred for Shiba. Maybe it's gross to be happy about this, but I am. Have I changed? Or was this the real me all along? I'm not sure, but I sorta think this is better.

There was nothing in the white room. I went back to where I was before.

TAMAKI	
LEVEL: 16	SWORDSMANSHIP: 7
PHYSICAL: 1	SKILL POINTS: 3

I returned to where I was before. This time, the other students were nowhere in sight.

Maybe someone from the men's dormitory was trying to get a glimpse of the situation over here, but I couldn't tell because the bright lights made it difficult to see while using night vision.

Anyhow, I ordered Arisu and the others to gather up all the scattered jewels. We had already defeated most of the monsters that attacked this place, so I figured we should pick up all of them. I didn't want our upperclassmen to receive power-ups with those items, so we had to take *everything*. Additionally, I was taking Shiba's gun. I could replicate bullets, but maybe we could use the gun—or at least the bullets in the gun. When I asked Arisu about it, she said Shiba had bullets in his waist pouch as well as in a bag on his back; we'd collect all of them.

"Where did Shiba get the hunting rifle?" I asked.

"One of the board members was stashing it away and using it in secret, apparently."

Ah, so this mountain is owned by the school... If we wandered around to where students weren't allowed to go, we could use the gun without getting caught. There were plenty of rounds left. Shiba had used a good amount, but there was still plenty more. I wondered how many bullets that board member kept on hand... Anyway, since he wasn't present—either he passed away or just wasn't at the school at the time—no one was left to ask about that now.

After collecting all of the jewels, us three started walking away from the first-year boys' dormitory without looking back. But when we got far away enough, Tamaki stopped.

"What the heck?! That guy's a real jerk!" Tamaki seemed to be trying to make up for our earlier shock and silence. A faint chuckle reverberated through the forest. At that, Arisu became agitated, waving her arms around and directing an imploring gaze at me.

"Oh, I see, you are still in the dark," a man dressed in ninja garb appears from behind a tree.

Arisu, panicked, went to attack him with her, but Tamaki quickly restrained her.

After we explained to her his identity, she asked, "Huh... he's Mia-chan's older brother?"

"Indeed, that is correct. And this," Yuuki handed me Mia's left arm, "is the arm we have all been searching for."

It was lighter than I expected, but it was a very important item, and that's why there had been such a commotion over it. The power balance was about to change.

The ninja took a step back and bowed in an act of politeness. "I leave Mia's safety to you."

"Yuuki-senpai, why not come with us to the Cultural Arts Center?" I asked.

The student in the ninja garb shook his head. "There are many things I need to do in this school—things that only I can manage."

He had previously mentioned that he was helping connect various evacuation centers across the region. Only a General Orc and Tamaki could likely spot him with his three ranks into reconnaissance. Tamaki stared at him with worry, but Yuuki smiled brightly.

"I have one request," he said. "I would like you to entrust me with a hunting rifle. I want to use it to help students reach Level 1."

Ah, with the proper shooting skills, it would be easy for him to take out an orc.

"Do you know how to shoot a gun?"

"I have learned some techniques through secret means. If you'd like, I can teach you the correct way to use firearms safely."

Wow, ninjas were amazing.

I was curious if Yuuki was truly as exceptional as he seemed. The problem now was whether his increased proficiency with a hunting rifle among level 1 high school students would end up working against us...

"There are certain conditions," I said.

"Which are...?"

"If you help more students reach Level 1, please gather them together."

He sighed quietly while folding his arms across his chest. I wasn't sure why he was so troubled. With his intelligence, creativity, and energy reserves, I figured he make a great leader.

If Yuuki was the one leading the high schoolers, we could be sure that allying with him would be a safe choice for us and the students at the Cultural Arts Center. I still resented many of my high school classmates, but I trusted Yuuki's abilities.

"But ninjas are supposed to remain hidden..." he murmured.

"Is that the problem here?" I blurted out. "Well, I guess if I look at it that way, you've got a point."

Now I get it. He sure commits to the bit...

"Looks like I have no alternative. If you wish it, then I'll take on the responsibility of guiding the organization. Is that acceptable?"

"Yes, you've got our trust so long as you lead them well." I smiled and handed him the hunting gun and its ammunition.

"Then I'll do my best to make the high school division better tomorrow."

"Except for the boys' dormitory group, right?"

The ninja nodded. "We'll direct the survivors to the Cultivation Center when it's time."

"Got it, we'll welcome them."

We each shook hands with Yuuki and went our separate ways. My two friends and I wearily began the march towards the middle school. We probably wouldn't reach the Cultural Arts Center until past eleven o'clock. With heavy legs, we kept walking.

I looked up to the sky and saw two moons, a bit fuller than what they were yesterday. I wondered if it was close to being full. I had no idea how this world worked, so maybe in a few days we'd see a full moon?

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As we returned to the Cultivation Center, the lookout girl announced our arrival. Shiki came flying out to greet us and ended up crashing into me. I admit it was my fault for this, so I accepted her rebuke without complaint. She hugged me tightly.

"Um, Shiki-san, are you okay touching me for so long, me being a guy and all?"

"Of course not, but I was worried about you." Shiki was crying.

She'd been genuinely worried about me, and I felt awful. Well, maybe she had ulterior motives for such a display. After all, thanks to her performance, all the girls at the Cultural Arts Center were in a joyful mood upon our return.

Mia emerged from the Cultural Arts Center, and Arisu quickly hugged her. Afterward, Mia walked over to me, scowling, and said, "Listen up, just close your eyes and be ready."

I did as I was told. Soon enough there was a kiss on my lips. When I opened them again, Mia had a smile on her face.

"Welcome back."

"Ah, it's good to be back."

We decided to put off any further conversation until the next day, but for the time being, I quickly informed Shiki of the events at the high school building.

"I understand," she replied. "Did you ever consider the worst-case scenario? That you might go insane and disappear? I agonized over what we would do in that situation."

I had left things in an awful state.

After Arisu and I disappeared, Shiki had led a team centered around Mia to launch another assault on the middle school's main building. They successfully cleared the top floor and freed two girls who had been held captive by the orcs.

The number of girls captured in the main building, including Sumire, totaled eleven. Our group, the Cultural Arts Center, had grown to thirty-one people. However, that was still far fewer survivors than what the high school group had.

"Let's focus on one problem at a time for now. Because you didn't wipe out the high school, we have a little more time. That's good news," Shiki said with a wicked chuckle.

She really was an excellent commander.

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I told Mia about her older brother, which came as a total shock to her. Her usually composed face had been replaced with one of utter distaste and embarrassment. It was a hilarious sight, so much so that we all burst out laughing.

"That troublesome brother..."

"For real. He wasn't what I expected."

"But..." Mia shook her head and smiled faintly. "Despite it all, I'm glad he's still alive."

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Arisu, Tamaki, and I were fortunate enough to be able to take a bath, thanks to the generator turning on and heating up the water. Shiki had told us taking a bath together would be beneficial for our relationships. We took her advice, getting into the tub together without any hesitation.

After a relaxing time in the hot water, my body started to become limp. *Oh no, this isn't good.* I collapsed onto the cold, tiled floor of the bathroom. I was so relaxed; I could fall asleep any moment. My limbs were too heavy to move, and even my lower half wouldn't respond.

Arisu and Tamaki tried to lift me up, and, somehow, I was exposed to them. I guessed I had been holding it in for a while... Man, it was so awkward.

"That's good, Kazu-san." Tamaki chuckled.

"You were seeing us in the worst light all day, but now that you've let yourself be vulnerable with us, we're even," Arisu said.

No, Tamaki. You've seen enough of my blunders... But I soon passed out.

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I stirred awake, lying in the middle of a double bed, flanked by Arisu and Tamaki. I quickly checked my pants to confirm they were wiped clean—nothing left from the mess I'd made earlier that day. Two pale blue moons were shining through the window. We had been here for two days now, and it felt like forever since we arrived in this new world.

I wanted to wake up Arisu and Tamaki so we could have some fun, but I didn't want to disturb their peaceful sleep. I was still tired, too, despite my nap. Soon enough, I drifted into unconsciousness again, and the second day drew to a close.

The third day of upheaval was about to begin.

Chapter 61: Beginning of the Third Day

My third day in another world began with me waking up startled due to the sound of shattering glass. Glancing around, I noticed that everything in my room was intact. However, upon looking out the window and into the next chamber, I saw that a window in there was completely broken, and something was lurking inside. I had no clue what it was or what had transpired, but I knew I had to investigate swiftly.

"Summon Elements: Wind," I commanded.

In a flash, an ethereal female figure materialized next to me. Arisu jolted awake, still wearing her workout clothes from earlier that evening. "What's wrong?"

"Enemy. Probably."

Alarmed, Arisu quickly reached for the iron spear she had leaning against the wall in the room.

"What's going on, nya?" Tamaki added, still half-asleep.

"Tamaki, stay put," I said. "Keep your sword nearby."

"Got it, nya."

I then stepped out into the hallway of the third floor, using my Wind Elemental as a barrier. Shiki-san, outfitted in her exercise gear, appeared from the opposite end. I told her to stay where she was and left quickly.

There was a loud thudding coming from the next room over.

"Let me open the door and let my summoned familiar in first," I said. "Arisu, go in after it." To protect us against whatever lurked beyond the threshold, I used the Wind Elemental as a shield. I twisted the knob on the door and opened it wide. The elemental flew inside, quickly followed by Arisu.

"A bee!" she cried out. "Kazu-san, there's a bee monster!"

I peered into the room. The Wind Elemental was locked in a struggle with an immense beelike creature, its black and yellow mottled body glinting in the light coming from its eerily glowing red eyes. It let out a loud hum as it hovered in the air, then thrust its stinger towards the elemental's torso. The elemental's translucent face contorted in pain; however, the faithful familiar seized the enemy's needle and held onto its rear end to control it.

Arisu surged forward, her iron spear piercing the giant bee's dual eyes, spraying out blue liquid upon impact. A loud cry reverberated throughout the area. The bee crumpled onto the ground, trembling until it went still. Its figure slowly began to blur and fade away like fog—just like what happened to the orcs. Were they both considered monsters?

Once the insect vanished, three glossy red jewels dropped onto the floor.

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It was just after six o'clock. The sun had recently risen, and yet I'd woken up later than the day before, even though I'd gone to sleep after midnight. I struggled to stay awake, but I didn't dare mention my exhaustion.

Shiki and I were hidden away in a private room, with Arisu and Tamaki keeping an eye on the perimeter.

Mia reported that there were several large bees hovering around the northeastern forest.

From the middle school, you could make out the forest in the northeast—two days ago it had been transported to this new world, and orcs had come from there. Was something lurking deep within the trees? What did this third day's monster attack signify?

"To be honest, I was planning to give Arisu-chan and Tamaki-chan a sweet honeymoon present until this morning."

"Hey now."

"I'm serious. Last night, I burdened you too much, and that was the fundamental reason. I don't regret attacking the main building. But it was my mistake not to realize that you were at your limit."

Shiki sat on the bed in this private room, her legs crossed underneath her as she looked up at me. "Should we add Mia-chan, then? That would be fairer to you."

"No more instigating!"

"You're not germophobic or anything, right? If you don't get yourself together, I won't be able to come up with any strategies, either."

I felt a wave of guilt wash over me. Shiki inspected me and nodded in approval, probably at the visible despair on my face.

"Good, you're reflecting. In any case, it looks like we can't make this easy for you."

"Yeah, apparently those bees came from the orcs' base on top of the mountain."

Shiki and I exchanged glances and agreed with each other's predictions. We were relieved that the commander's orders had been followed. Unfortunately, there was no more time to delay our mission.

"Kazu-kun, I know this is a lot to ask, but we need to find out what happened to the students that were captured. We have to know whether they're still alive. If the situation hasn't been resolved yet, then we need to act quickly, or risk worsening it."

Yesterday we all witnessed the power of the giant wasp. We can't afford to be complacent; it is only by taking the offensive that we will find a way out of this.

"Kazu-kun, what was it like to fight against that bee monster?"

"Arisu defeated it in one hit. It wasn't as strong as an Elite Orc, but definitely tougher than an ordinary one. I'd say it was Level 2 or 3."

"The Giant Wasp must be around a Wasp 2 to Wasp 3 classification, and its skill set should also match that range."

There was definitely no disagreement concerning the name of the bee: the Giant Wasp.

"I reckon it's probably at Wasp 3 strength. It seemed to have roughly half the power of a Rank 5 summoned elemental."

"If that's true, it should give the same amount of experience points as those three orcs. Doesn't seem like its strength was much to worry about."

"It can fly too... We should still figure out its weaknesses, if it has any."

"Weaknesses..." Shiki cupped her face in her hand, deep in thought. "Fire's effective against bugs in video games."

"That's just in video games," I said.

"It'd be the quickest solution. Too bad that's our biggest roadblock." Shiki smiled, and I sighed.

"Right. If only Mia could use fire magic."

"There's a kid who ranked up their fire magic to Level 2 in yesterday's battle. I want to test them out. It might be a good idea to have Tamaki guard them and take them to the forest."

"Some of the kids we rescued yesterday want to fight too. We need to get them to Level 1, and we can't just attack the northern forest without preparation."

"We also need to apply hard armor and hard weapons to their gym clothes and weapons, right?"

I had learned some new magic, like Summon Weapon at Rank 4 and Summon Armor at Rank 5. These spells allowed the caster to bring forth predetermined weapons and armor. The effects of these spells were permanent, but the selection of weapons and armor was somewhat restricted. With Summon Weapon. The caster could call upon a total of twelve types of weaponry such as long swords, spears, staffs, bows, and an additional twenty arrows. For armor, there were from seven options, such as leather armor and metal armor, in addition to shields. However, it was possible for the caster to specify the size when summoning the equipment; for example, if Mia needed metal armor that wasn't too big, I could supply that through this spell.

In that scenario, Tamaki's items and accessories also needed to be taken into account. Additionally, Mia could obtain shielding techniques from the Mia Vendor and equip a large shield to ward off incoming attacks. Another idea was

for Tamaki to act as a shield, while Arisu and Mia launched their assaults from behind her.

I had also learned a noteworthy magical spell called Summon Circle (a Rank 6 spell), which required some preliminary preparation. First, I had to draw a circle on the floor of one room in this cultural hall. Then, I had to place an object or person inside the drawn circle. Lastly, I'd cast the Summon Circle spell from afar.

Through this teleportation magic, I could make things appear in front of me inside a three-meter diameter circle. I could even employ it strategically by, for example, placing explosives near an enemy stronghold—if I had access to any dynamite, that is. Alternatively, I could store supplies inside and collect them as needed.

The best application of this spell was for transporting people, but since communication devices like phones and radios didn't work here, we had to arrange a time beforehand to meet. A maximum of two starting circles were allowed; one would remain fixed in the greenhouse, while the other would be moved around as needed.

"That magic really is something," Shiki said.

"Yeah, I'd bet I could even fly up to a cliff and set up a circle there..."

"Ah, that's right. You have Summoning Magic at Rank 6, which means you can use Summon Griffon."

As expected of Shiki; she remembered the magic skills of each person very well. Summon Griffon is a Rank 6 summoning spell I hadn't used yet, but with it, I'd summon and control an eagle-like giant familiar that soared through the air. Plus, I'd be able to ride on its back to fly around.

As far as we knew, there were only three other methods of flying at Rank 6 or lower. First, there was Wing Magic at Rank 6, which granted the user angel wings on their back. The length of flight time varied from twenty to thirty minutes depending on one's rank; however, flapping the wings required a lot of physical effort.

Then there was Wind Magic's Fly at Rank 4, which let the caster float in the air simply by thinking about it. One could move around freely in all directions for two to three minutes depending on the rank. It didn't last nearly as long as the Summon Griffin or Wing Magic, but Fly was easier to control, and it was easier to get access to it, with it also having a learning rank two levels lower.

Lastly, the Wind Walk spell allowed one to seemingly walk on air. It was far more convenient than the other methods of aerial travel. The spell's duration depended upon the rank of the user, similar to Wing Magic. There were many spells that can be utilized with Wind Magic, depending on the context. The Wind Elemental and crows, among others, also possessed the ability to fly.

With the various means of flying, I concluded there would likely be situations in the future where flying is necessary—if we thought of it as a game, that is.

If we raised our ranks, our main party would acquire all of these means of flying. We could use these spells depending on the situation. Plus, it'd be great if we could also fly to deal with the giant bees...

"By the way, Mia, what level are you now?" I asked.

"I've reached Level 10. I have four skill points saved up."

Should we use those four points to raise Mia's Wind Magic to Rank 4, or prioritize raising her earth magic to acquire a powerful attack?

"Let's put Mia on Tamaki's bee test interception squad. If necessary, she can learn Wind Magic in a jiffy." Even though finding the proper name for the team was another issue altogether, I reckoned this was the best decision we had. I had more faith in Mia's gaming aptitude than my overthinking.

"All right, let's give it a shot."

And so, the busy third day of being in this other world began.

Chapter 62: Diversified Attack

We broke into three divisions. The first group was the Giant Wasp eradication team, which consisted of Tamaki, Mia, and two students who could wield fire magic. Arisu and Shiki were in charge of the second team, whose purpose was to instruct rookies and thrust them up to Level 1. I and the other remaining members formed the standby team responsible for safeguarding the dojo in the Cultural Arts Center.

My main role was to summon weapons and armor using summoning magic, and I'd enhance my companions' combat power with hard weapons and hard armor.

"We need to cultivate archers, especially now that we have flying enemies, but we don't have the luxury to do so," Shiki said.

Therefore, I needed to summon as many javelins as I could, so they'd be used as throwing spears in the Spearmanship skill. A javelin created through Summon Weapon Rank 4 was slightly better than the one used by the orcs and had a good flight distance. If I used full strength to throw them, they could reach the top of tall trees. If I equipped them with hard weapons, they could be quite effective against a Giant Wasp.

However, summoning ten javelins and equipping them with hard weapons would consume 80 MP alone. Because I was only at Level 18, it would take me forty-five minutes to restore that much MP. Additionally, I had to get everyone their gym clothes outfitted with hard armor and ready the rest of the armor for those fighting on the front line.

No matter how much MP I had, it still wasn't enough. I should have done this before bed last night, but exhaustion had taken over by then.

After a brief struggle—the cooking team used as little electricity as they could from the generator—breakfast was ready. The warm rice hit the spot, and the miso soup was full of flavor. Breakfast was delicious.

Once everyone had left, I was in the lobby with Tamaki. She was holding her equipment in the lobby when I handed her a big shield. The Tower Shield, it was called, and it could cover someone from head to toe.

"Tamaki, try using this. The Giant Wasps fire thick spikes. This should protect your friends," I said.

"Whoa, it's huge! Do you think I should take a Shield Skill?"

I looked over at Mia, who was standing with crossed arms next to Tamaki before replying. "First of all, test how easy it is to use this shield. If you want to give it a try, then Tamaki's Strength at Rank 1 is the best choice."

The next morning, Mia was practically stuck to me, arm around mine. That seemed to be fine. Honestly, I was relieved. Mia was knowledgeable about games. Well, even though this was very much reality, I thought her gamelike thinking was quite reliable. Any ideas or hints she came up with would be a bonus.

She tapped the Tower Shield and said, "Kazu-san, this shield isn't made of wood. Is it some kind of magical material?"

"I'm not sure—I summoned it. But it's quite lightweight. And I put Hard Armor on it, so it should be safe against bee stings."

"Okay, let's hide behind this and cast Fire Magic."

"That's the plan. Mia, you lead everyone," I said as she nodded firmly.

Beside her, Tamaki tilted her head and asked quizzically, "What makes you not trust my leadership, Kazu-san?"

"Well, you tend to rush things along and are a bit of a show-off. That doesn't really make someone a great leader," Mia replied bluntly.

Tamaki let out an exasperated sigh, and when I tried to cheer her up, she brushed it off.

"It's okay, Kazu-san. I already had a feeling," she said with a brave smile. I found that so admirable—that she could bounce back so quickly from disappointment. I scratched the back of my ear and forced on a grin.

"We need to be careful that no one gets too much preferential treatment or else someone may end up getting hurt," I warned them, remembering what we had learned in the past few days. Today needed to be even better than yesterday. Meanwhile, Arisu's and Shiki's team members were very well-coordinated; two spear-wielding girls at the front and six Level 0s following behind moved swiftly together towards the lobby exit.

"Arisu!" I shouted without thinking. She was holding one of the javelins I had conjured in her left hand, with the other girls taking up the nine others to fight against the giant wasps. They could use those weapons both to stab orcs and to protect themselves.

"What do you need, Kazu-san?" she asked.

"Umm..." I murmured, shifting my gaze to Shiki, who was standing next to Arisu.

Shiki smiled and whispered something into Arisu's ear. Arisu's eyes widened, and she hurried over to me. Standing directly in front of me, she clasped her hands behind her back and inched her chest towards me, studying my face before I could find words again.

"I'm gonna go now, Kazu-san."

"Be careful... Stay safe," I replied.

Shiki laughed at Arisu's back as she smiled softly at me.

"Of course! I won't leave without permission this time."

"I believe you."

She fully knew I was anxious that she might disappear somewhere when she left the Cultural Arts Center. Damn her.

Anyway.

Arisu quickly kissed my cheek and smiled shyly as we looked at each other.

"Well, then."

"Yes, let's go."

I could tell everyone around us was chuckling at our exchange. Even Tamaki and Mia. It's embarrassing, and I feel sorry for Tamaki, but... yeah, I was really worried.

If you want to laugh at what a sorry sight I am, go ahead.

I decided to accept that about myself. No matter how pathetic I may be, even if I embarrass myself, I will walk the path I have chosen.

It's the path I walk with Arisu, Tamaki, and everyone at this Cultural Arts Center.

Arisu and Shiki left first. Tamaki and Mia were about to follow them, but they stopped and looked back at me.

"What's up?" I asked.

"We want to come along too, Kazu-san," they replied in unison.

"Well..."

Tamaki and Mia kissed my cheeks before quickly leaving out the door. I waved goodbye as I spun around, ready to go myself. The remaining girls shared a look on their faces when they saw me preparing to leave. I bowed my head in apology for causing them distress.

"I get how this raises some red flags," I admitted.

"So I've heard," one of the girls said. "You must have been through a lot yesterday."

Sumire Suginomiya was a close friend of Arisu and Tamaki. Her hair cascaded down her chest, parted into two pigtails, and glasses too large for her face were perched on the bridge of her nose. To most people, she seemed like a bookworm, which wasn't surprising considering she often visited the library. I figured that was how she got to know Arisu so well. As for me, I was in a unique position—involved with both her best friends at the same time. It made me feel guilty, as if I deserved all the dirty looks people gave me. Sumire just smiled in response.

"Kazu-san, you're like a hero out of a story," she said with a hint of amusement. "You could stand to be more sure of yourself."

"A hero out of a story... That's funny." I grinned sadly, remembering the mess I was in only twenty-four hours ago. No way would Sumire feel the same way if she saw my true self.

I was just trying to stay alive with everyone else. I kept at it, but in the end, I misinterpreted things and made quick decisions that threw everything away.

A person like me couldn't be any kind of hero.

But Sumire shook her head and whispered into my ear. "Still, you came back. You returned with Arisu and Tamaki. Tamaki had held onto my neck and said all I had to do was help Arisu. So you, Arisu, and Tamaki are even more connected as a trio—or maybe Mia could make it a group of four. Who knows," Sumire said with a chuckle.

"If both Arisu and Tamaki like you, I'm fine with it," she continued. "It's great to see them happy together. That's all we care about." Her confident answer was completely different from her nervous demeanor yesterday.

Their relationship is somewhat difficult for others to understand. However, upon closer inspection, it may have been the case yesterday as well. Arisu and Tamaki have a strong connection with each other, even though they may seem a bit odd at times. They always seem to perfectly understand each other's thoughts and feelings.

When I thought Arisu had betrayed me, Tamaki believed in her. In the end, it was Tamaki who opened my eyes. It's a little enviable. I have never had a friend I could trust like that. I have always been betrayed.

That's why their bond made me even more envious. Sumire bowed her head slightly and said, "I know I might be poking my nose in where it doesn't belong, but please take care of Arisu and Tamaki for me." She smiled warmly.

Chapter 63: The Leftover Group

Shiki had reported that there were thirty-one students based at the Cultural Arts Center. Among them, ten of us—including me and Arisu—were from the first day group, while twenty-one more, including Sumire, were students we'd rescued yesterday from the orcs who'd deeply hurt them.

Typically, such a traumatic experience would leave lasting emotional damage, but thanks to Arisu's healing and Cure Mind abilities, all of them had recovered both physically and mentally. After a night's rest, most of the students had regained their energy.

Shiki said that twelve of them displayed a powerful fighting spirit. A total of sixteen out of those twenty-one students had decided to battle for the cause, including the four from yesterday: Sakura Nagatsuki and her group.

The five remaining adventurers were still wavering in their decision-making or had simply given up hope, even with the aid of Cure Mind. Sumire realized her fighting skills were subpar and chose to be shielded by the others.

"When I get overwhelmed, my sense of direction totally goes away, and I'm just as clumsy as Tamaki," she explained.

It would be reckless to put someone like that on the front lines. Although it could have been okay for her to take a rearguard role, the idea of her randomly casting fire spells from behind made everyone shudder.

Sumire offered to reach Level 1 and defeat suitable orcs when they stopped to rest. Additionally, she wanted to help by learning healing and summoning magic, creating food and water so that everyone could keep going in times of need. Having her around, at least in this capacity, would be a huge help. If possible, we'd even want her to reach Level 3.

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Sakura Nagatsuki approached me, seeking advice on the type of armor she should wear. I offered leather armor, but it was too heavy and hindered her mobility. She had tried it for a battle against the General Orc and the Hellhound from yesterday evening—a fight which we won thanks to her courageous behavior. We were fortunate that she managed to survive while drawing the monster's attention. People like her who can fight beyond their abilities are invaluable.

When I asked what kind of armor she desired, she said she wanted something light, hard-wearing, and comfortable. Though I agreed this would be great, I pointed out that such an item was impossible to create. "Do you realize you're asking for the impossible?" I asked.

"I guess I'll just have to wear my gym gear," she said with a sigh, realizing her predicament was hopeless. Even though all I wanted was for her to be safe, given her style of combat, the last thing we needed was for heavy armor to restrict her movement.

"How about using only the upper body component of the leather armor?" I suggested, understanding how important agility is for her fighting style.

I suggested the gym uniform for the lower half. She complied, so I took the armor and used a knife to detach the connecting parts from the other pieces. When I returned it to her, she only had the breastplate left on. She tried it on and seemed satisfied; a small smile broke out on her face.

"Thanks Kazu... senpai."

"No need to call me senpai," I replied. "I haven't done anything worthy of respect."

Sakura inspected the area to make sure no one was around before responding, "That's not true." She continued, her gaze on me. "You manage even when in a tough spot, and you have the traits of a good leader. We need that."

"I do...?"

"I used to frequently visit the high school for practice and had heard about you."

Ah, I see. I nodded in understanding. She had been observing me all this time, even when I was cruelly bullied.

"You didn't give up on yourself. You strengthened your blade and waited for an opportunity for revenge—I recall the look in your eyes then," Sakura said.

"Was I really like that?" I asked, still in disbelief.

Sakura nodded in agreement.

"If you've competed at a high level in sports, then you know that those with a strong presence can be intimidating," she said.

I didn't totally understand what she meant, but I figured that it was the firm look on my face that drew out the intensity of Shiba's rage.

Seeing me remain silent, Sakura shifted uncomfortably and bowed her head.

"Sorry about that," she said.

"What are you apologizing for?" I asked.

"For embarrassing you back there."

"Ah, yeah... It was really mortifying to remember all that stuff from high school. I completely lost it when Shiba and Arisu were together, and I have no excuses for that. But now he's gone—I killed him."

"It's over."

"Yeah."

"Do you feel satisfied now that he's dead?"

If I arrived at the high school section and people mock me with their stares, I didn't know what it might do to my heart. I didn't want to overthink it, though. *Arisu will always be by my side, along with Tamaki and Mia. That's what I choose to believe.*

"By the way, what have you heard about Shiba's death or the situation in the high school zone?" I asked her.

"Arisu-senpai and the others filled me in on everything after you fainted in the bath."

So Shiki left it up to Arisu once again to explain what was happening. Then again, I'd given Shiki only a brief overview the day before.

"I'm just not able to wrap my head around it like you are," Sakura Nagatsuki said as she bowed her head low. Her ponytail swayed behind her like a tail.

Ever since we ended up here, we held onto our fragile hopes as we fought for survival. The only thing that kept us going was our burning desire to kill all the orcs. I suppose I made it because I harbored such strong emotion. Those who gave up on living died. Maybe after yesterday, things could be different.

She looked up at me, her expression changing to one of defiance. She curled her fist and placed it over her chest, smirking ever so slightly.

"Unlike you, my feelings cannot be tamed. This black flame in my chest will never disappear until I wipe out every orc."

I had thought this since yesterday but hadn't said anything. "If you fight with such passionate intensity, you're sure to die."

She replied without hesitation, "If I do die, at least I can die at ease."

"Yeah, I know. I think we're all more or less the same in that sense. But that's why I don't want you to die. It's unfair for you to win and escape alone."

"Do I have to suffer more?" she asked, as if inquiring about tomorrow's first period class.

Mimicking her emotionless voice, I said, "We need to vomit blood and crawl on the ground for us to survive."

"Why?" She was perplexed.

"Most likely because we are at our maximum capacity now. We can't help out any more students from the orcs. Moreover, with each death of ours, the ones that are left will be exposed to even harsher conditions. That's why none of us should die. For the sake of our comrades," I explained.

Sakura showed confusion in her face. "Comrades?"

"Yeah, you're my comrade," I stated.

"You helped us because you needed pawns to fight, right?"

"I won't lie—that's one of the reasons," I replied with a sly grin. Shiki and I were calculated strategists. We didn't let our emotions cloud our judgement when we planned an attack. Wishful thinking doesn't help win battles.

I used logic to persuade Shiki of my point. She used logic to outsmart me.

This was why we always strive for ruthlessness in our strategies; without it, survival was impossible. We both knew that reality all too well.

I felt a sense of closeness to the thirty-one people who were currently based in the Cultural Arts Center. Otherwise, I wouldn't have been so shocked when Akane Shimoyamada died yesterday.

"To be clear, Sakura Nagatsuki, do you consider us as comrades or not?"

"It's not that simple." Sakura seemed bemused, her cheeks a bit rosy. It was clear that I had said something embarrassing.

"Well, okay." I pursed my lips as if disappointed.

I didn't want to see anybody die because of me again. Enemies or not, I would slaughter them all if they were a threat. But when it came to people under my protection, I wanted to keep them safe at all costs. My explanation came out as a hesitant jumble of words. Voicing such naive beliefs for a young man like myself was terribly embarrassing. Though in this moment, it felt okay for us to express our immature thoughts without being judged by social standards that we have followed until now.

After I finished speaking, Sakura gave a small shrug of her shoulders.

"Senpai, you're much more embarrassing than I thought."

"Yeah, no need to point it out."

"But I think that's a good thing."

Sakura rarely wore her emotions on her sleeve, but at that moment, a beautiful smile adorned her lips, like a flower in full bloom. Despite myself, I felt my heart skip a beat. I quickly shook away the feeling.



Sakura's expression turned slightly rueful. "Please don't misunderstand me. I have a lot of respect for you, and I'm not trying to compete with Arisu-senpai, Tamaki-senpai, or anyone."

"Oh, no worries," I replied, feeling my composure starting to slip away.

"But..." Sakura said in a more serious tone, her eyes focused on me.

"I think it's good that you're so passionate about this, senpai. At the same time though, I don't want any of us to get too close to you."

"Because my heart will break if you die...?"

"Yes. You should get used to seeing people dying around you."

My face must have shown my bitterness, because Sakura quickly looked down apologetically.

"Sorry, that was rude."

"No, it's fine. It's nice that you care," I assured her.

"Just remember one thing: everyone thinks like I do."

"Everyone?"

"Everyone you rescued from the orc yesterday have been watching their comrades die around them for a long time. We're already used to people around us dying—maybe even to the point where we think it's natural to die ourselves. That's why we're even more worried about you, senpai."

As she said that, Sakura's eyes met mine. They looked somewhat vacant.

Ah... I took a deep breath. I was sucked into those eyes and couldn't say anything.

Chapter 64: The Giant Wasp

After almost half an hour, Arisu and her squad returned from their mission to upgrade the Level 0 students to Level 1. Six of them had made it.

"We ran into a wasp on the way," Shiki reported, who was there as backup. "Arisu decided to get stung deliberately by it. She said she felt a numbness coming out of the bite, like a venomous paralysis. It's better to avoid getting stung if feasible."

"What the heck, man?!" I shouted in surprise, sounding more like a yakuza than before. I immediately tried to walk that back, but Arisu was already explaining her side.

"N-no, it's not like that Kazu-san. I was the one who wanted to test it out. I can recover speedily from something like that."

Of course, since Arisu was a higher level than the others, she could possibly endure most onslaughts. However, if her Rank 4 Healing Magic rendered her immobile, we would all be in trouble.

Shiki stayed collected. Maybe she had already decided from the beginning that everything would work out. No doubt she had thought of the risk of ending up in such a dilemma in advance.

"We managed to heal the paralysis toxin with Cure Poison," Shiki declared. "If you treat the sting immediately, then you should be all right. There don't seem to be any signs of shock."

Cure Poison was a Rank 2 healing spell. Hmm, looks like we'll have to train more Rank 2 magicians.

"But wasn't there still a possibility of shock symptoms showing up?"

"It's called a shock symptom, but don't expect an immediate reaction from getting stung by a bee," Shiki-san. "We've been living in this mountain school for some time, so we know a decent amount about insects."

Arisu smiled weakly, wincing as she nodded. "I wasn't too good with them at first," she admitted.

Shiki glanced towards Arisu before continuing. "Arisu could handle the Giant Wasp with one of her javelins, while I needed two knives to take it out, seeing as my Throwing rank is only 2."

It appeared that the two had formed a team and defeated two bees; Arisu also gained a level up to 16 after the first bee.

"That's reassuring news."

Shiki progressed to Level 4 after defeating the second bee.

"From what Arisu-chan said, it looks like the Giant Wasp's experience points were equal to three orcs," he commented.

"That is definitely useful information," I replied in agreement.

"I also took the liberty of judging which skills you should use..." Shiki continued. "Was that okay?"

"What did you choose?"

"I increased your healing magic. In case of a future emergency, having Rapid Heal might be helpful."

I nodded my head in approval.

Rapid Heal was a Level 5 spell that activated instantaneously and could heal three times more powerfully than a regular Heal spell.

But then again, while the MP consumption for a regular Heal spell was only one point, Rapid Heal required five MP—rendering its efficiency rather low...

Still, after going through such intense battles, we had come to understand that during a fight, immediate, high-performance healing was sometimes more important than MP efficiency.

Thanks to the Rapid Heal, the battles would be more certain now.

"With something like Sustenance at Rank 5, we can feel secure in case of an emergency."

"I hope we won't have to test that, but you're right," she replied.

Sustenance was a special magic that kept people alive even if their head was removed. As per the questions and answers section on the matter, when cast just after such an occurrence, this spell could put someone into a state of suspended animation for thirty seconds until cured with Cure Deficiency, then treated with Heal. Essentially, it served as insurance against decapitation.

"Seems wise. Thank you, Shiki-san. Arisu, I'll rely on you from now on."

"Yes! You can count on me!" she nodded vigorously in agreement.

Those eight studentss were ready to go once again.

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The Arisu-Shiki Group gave way to Tamaki-Mia Group after the bee-hunting with Fire Magic proved to be successful. Evidently, Fire Magic was more destructive than Earth or Wind Magic. Mia said as much: "There's no doubt that fire is especially effective."

They had managed to slay six giant wasps.

"They couldn't tell which way was up once we blew them away with Sonic Edge," Mia said, her voice drifting as she thought back on it.

Sonic Edge was a Rank 2 Wind Magic spell that released a wind blade. We nicknamed it a "vacuum blade." Besides, science and physical laws were no match for the power of magic in this world.

Magic was remarkable.

Our questions with the computer in the white room suggested that attack magic used a certain kind of mana that provides direction and orientation. Our mentor in the white room didn't explain this very well, though. My guess was that Sonic Edge releases mana with those offensive capabilities, accompanied by wind attributes as a secondary effect. The massive wasps were thrown off balance by the gust, losing their footing.

When I put it all together in my mind like that, I was reminded of just how amazing Mia really is.

Tamaki got the same impression, too. "Mia-chan is really amazing. Her way of thinking is just like her big bro's!"

"Hmm. Tamaki-chan, could you squat down for a moment?" Mia asked.

"Huh, what for?" Tamaki obediently did so—just for Mia to slap her forehead as hard as she could. "Ow!" Tamaki yelped. Her hands clutched her head as she dropped dropped to the floor. "That hurts! Mia-chan, where did that come from?"

"You started it," she muttered.

"Nah-uh." Tamaki looked up at Mia in confusion. "Mia-chan, why are you mad? You look weirdly serious."

"Mia, don't take it out on Tamaki. She's just like that," I said.

"I know," Mia muttered, gritting her teeth and looking up at me stoically. Despite looking no different from usual, she definitely seemed angry.

"What I mean is, we're praising you and comparing you to your brother because you're talented."

"But you're wrong." Mia shook her head. "My brother is far more intelligent than I am." And with that, she turned away with a short exhale. "It's annoying, but he's a real genius, whereas I'm only a decent student."

Her view of herself as average gave me a chuckle. What a kid!

She went on. "But my brother's way of using his talents is terrible."

"I haven't known Yuuki-senpai for long, but I see where you're coming from."

"As his sister, it makes my blood boil."

It may have appeared to be sibling rivalry from an outsider's point of view, but I kept that thought to myself. I didn't want to plant any landmines so early in the morning. Mia's gaze made me uneasy, as if she could read my mind.

"Kazu-chan."

"Yes, what is it, Mia-san?"

"Why are you being so polite?" she asked.

"I assumed you were mad, so I'm trying to be courteous."

Mia released a heavy sigh and slouched. "My brother really is a genius. Whenever I compare myself to him, it only makes me more insecure," she confessed.

"Is it really that bad...?" It was hard for me to grasp why he would kill an orc like a professional assassin instead of just digging a trap. His thought process eluded me. It'd be so much easier to do the latter, so why expend all that effort.

"Kazu-chan, you're also pretty absent-minded," Mia said.

"Really...?" I turned my head toward her.

At that moment, Arisu and the rest of the group returned. They had all successfully reached Level 1 status. Finally, we had an opportunity to move forward with our initial plan.

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We were having a discussion in the lobby.

"After we rest a bit and restore our MP, we'll move on to the full-scale conquest of the Northern Forest," Shiki explained, looking every person in the eye one by one. "We'll dispatch two parties with eight people total."

Shiki listed off names in order. For our elite party of four, there was Shiki, Sakura Nagatsuki, and two who could use Fire Magic. Then the support party would take on the role of long-range attacks that our elite party lacked.

"Well then, let's start with you, Kazu-kun. Can I ask you to do some reconnaissance with your crow?" Shiki asked.

I summoned my crow and borrowed its eyes using remote viewing. The crow flew off to the northern forest.

The simple reconnaissance revealed one fact, which I relayed. "In the Northern Forest, orcs are hiding in the trees. They have bows, albeit crude ones."

That was bad news. Our elite party was based on close combat, and we hadn't considered enemies shooting arrows from the trees.

"Well, this might mean that the support party will become the main party."

"Hmm, that's not a bad idea, but..." Shiki thought for a moment before looking up. "Let's change the formation a bit. I'll do some advance reconnaissance."

That was bold. What a surprise.

Chapter 65: Conquer the Northern Forest - Part 1

The Northern Forest conquest team of eight people arrived at the forest entrance, located not far from the Cultural Arts Center, around 10 in the morning. Arisu and Tamaki wore breastplates and shoulder pads over their gym clothes from my Summon Armor, but everyone else hesitated to put on the heavy lower body armor that could slow them down. Sakura Nagatsuki only had a leather breastplate, as she relied heavily on her mobility.

The others were dressed in gym clothes; Shiki suggested these were best for stealth missions, being light and able to help you escape quickly should anyone need to.

The protective qualities of hard armor were only true for the topmost layer. Even if someone wore multiple layers of armor, their defensive capability did not increase.

Everyone had strapped on their backpacks like they had done before to take over the main school building; these packs were stocked with items such as energy bars, candy bars, water bottles, compasses, lighters, ropes and flashlights.

At first glance, the forest near the path up the mountain seemed unchanged from its previous state. However, upon looking closer, we noticed a striking difference.

"I can't hear any birds or insects," Shiki said.

As she said, there was an eerie silence in the forest. There was only the rustle of leaves in the wind, creating an oppressive quietness.

Shiki headed into the darkness of the forest as planned, infiltrating with her excellent stealth abilities and disappearing from view.

Tamaki was clearly worried for her safety, but I was sure everyone felt the same way. Nonetheless, Shiki was the only one with the skill for reconnaissance

work. The group contemplated the difficulty of raising non-attack skills to Rank 2. When they were smaller—at around ten members—a single person could manage reconnaissance. However, now there were twenty-six of them, including twelve who had just reached Level 1, and that meant they needed different tactics going forward.

One person suggested that once this mission was finished, Shiki should step back and remain in a safe zone while giving commands.

Shiki may have even already given the topic some thought; after all, just yesterday she said she didn't want to fight. The group had changed in a short amount of time. But for now, they had to focus on the task before them.

Shiki came back quickly with news that there were four orc archers positioned in the tree tops, along with two giant wasps buzzing about the surrounding area.

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"See that orc with the bow? It had green skin and was nearly invisible amongst the trees," she said. "It doesn't look like a regular grunt, but a different type of orc trained for hunting. This is a bit clichéd, but let's call it the Orc Archer, Kazu-kun," she suggested.

"Shouldn't we call it the Archer Orc instead?" I asked.

"Well... it sounds kind of odd in that order," she replied.

I wished she had mentioned that before, when we'd named the elite orc. My thoughts were probably clear as day on my face, since Shiki-san smiled weakly at me.

"Oh well, Archer Orc is fine," she said.

"Sorry about that, Granny," I said.

"Don't worry about it, Grandpa."

Laughter filled the room, letting everyone know that our leadership team had no grudges between us. Mia's knowing grin confirmed my suspicions—she could read the unspoken tension in the air.

"We need to figure out how to handle the archers with their killer wasp formation," I said.

Mia quickly responded, "The giant wasps can be used as bait." She always had an answer when it came to tactics.

"What do you mean by bait?" Tamaki asked, her large shield held firmly.

Mia answered, "The wasps will attract the attention of the invaders and give the archers a chance to shoot them down."

Ah, she knew all about warfare: use your opponent's strength against them.

"That sounds complicated," Tamaki replied. "But we know what to do now. We can stay alert and even be proactive."

Turning my attention back to Mia, I asked, "So, what would you do?"

"In a game, I would go around to the side or behind the archer to shoot from there. Then I would move around the edge of the map and eliminate them one by one."

The answer came back like a ringing bell. Mia was a great teacher.

"But in this case, it's better to give up," she said.

"Why?"

"We don't have enough control over our unit to surround them. And there could still be hidden troops. Unlike in a game, we don't know the total number of units we'll be facing. Besides, there's no end to the battlefield."

It was a valid point. The distinction between games and reality was clear. This meant we had no choice but to attack head-on...

"We could use a decoy and reveal their location, then take them out from a distance," Mia said, looking at me. "And of course, there are unconventional tactics too."

"Unconventional tactics?" I asked.

"I thought we could use Invisibility and Silent Field to sneak up on the Archer Orc and cut a hole into the tree where he was sitting, so that it would collapse. That way, when the archer fell, we'd be waiting for them."

It was a nastier plan than I'd expected. Invisibility and Silent Field were the same tactics we used in the surprise attack at the main school building in middle school.

Arisu raised an eyebrow. "Why don't we just use Rampage Plant?"

We had used that Rank 3 Earth Magic spell during the battle near the Agriculture Building on the second day. However, it had a slow start, making it difficult to catch an enemy by surprise.

"We'll reveal we're using Rampage Plant as soon as the trees start moving, which means any advantage of surprise would be lost," I replied.

Mia proposed that Rampage Plant could be used to set a trap. The trees would begin to tremble as if they were being rocked by a gentle breeze, and the older the tree, the harder it would be to control it.

"I should mention," Shiki-san observed, "the archer's riding on an especially thick one."

That made our plan even more difficult; we might succeed in driving it out of its treetop hideout, but would it escape?

I looked to Shiki for direction. After pondering for a bit, she said, "Let's go with Mia's plan. We need someone to guard her."

"Tamaki-chan, will you stay close to Mia-chan and protect her with your shield?"

"No problem!" Tamaki exclaimed.

It looks like we're going to use a simulated RPG tactic with Tamaki as our tank, shielding us from damage.

"Kazu-kun, please buff us," she requested.

I opted against using Summoning Magic and focus on Support Magic instead. I cast Physical Up and Clear Mind on everyone in our party before giving the two Fire Magic users Smart Operation to increase their magical prowess. For the vanguard, Mighty Arm. I'd used 22 MP so far, but since I was Level 18, that was something I could recover within ten minutes.

Next, I summoned a Wind Elemental as my guard. At this point, the crow and this Wind Elemental were my only familiars.

After a bit of walking into the forest, Mia cast Silent Field and Invisibility on both herself and Tamaki for a short duration of three to four minutes. To counteract this, I cast my four spells at Rank 5 with Extend Spell added, which doubled their duration, plus one See Invisibility spell for myself just in case.

"Let's begin! You two, don't be afraid," I said.

Mia and Tamaki, both cloaked in invisibility, held hands and began to move. This time around, Tamaki had her silver sword sheathed away, only carrying a large shield in her left hand while keeping hold of Mia's right hand. Shiki's figure was no longer visible either. If all went according to plan, she should have been tailing the pair from behind.

Minutes slowly ticked past us. After approximately five minutes had passed by, the sounds of battle up ahead started drifting towards us.

"Hurry!" Arisu yelled as she bolted forward.

We followed suit after her.

Chapter 66: Conquer the Northern Forest - Part 2

By the time we arrived, Tamaki and Mia were already clashing with the orcs. A nearby tree was split in two due to a green-skinned orc careening into it, but Tamaki's silver sword quickly finished it off.

I leveled up. Off to the white room.

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Once I entered the white room, I thought there wasn't anything in particular for me to do.

But Mia was wearing a devious smile as she unpacked her backpack: out came handcuffs, ropes, and candles. The rope wasn't the same one Shiki had prepared—it was thinner and longer.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"We're going to punish Arisu-chan for her actions yesterday," Mia replied.

"I should be punishing you for bringing these items. Why didn't you use the ropes Shiki prepared?" I asked.

"Not everyone needs one," she said. "Let's make the most of our time here."

I wasn't sure what that meant until Mia took out a whip from her bag too.

"You really planned ahead," I said with a sigh.

"I worked hard to prepare everything."

Mia stood tall with pride, her hard work having paid off. It reminded me of Yuuki-senpai in a way. I knew better than to say anything about it, though.

"Wow, Mia-chan, you're like a ninja," Tamaki said, genuinely meaning it as a compliment.

Mia turned and, with a wave of her hand, cast Wind Magic Rank 3 on Tamaki. The rope began to bound around her in a flurry of movement, but Mia couldn't control the spell properly.

"Wait, Mia-chan, wait!" Tamaki cried out in alarm, but Mia simply replied that she needs more practice. Eventually, the rope fell flat on the floor.

"Feeling better now, Mia?" Tamaki asked.

"A little bit."

After spending time with Mia, one might notice the loneliness in her eyes. Yesterday she was left out of the fight and felt helpless to find us. It must have been a hard experience for her, being stuck there waiting for us. Now we three have grown closer.

"Hey, Mia, come over here."

"Okay." She shuffles over and I scratched the back of her head. Her eyes closed in contentment.

"You're still important to us, okay? Nothing will ever change that. We'll be together forever."

Mia looked up at me through sleepy eyes and asked in a shy voice, "Can you hug me, then?"

I lightly flicked Mia's forehead.

"Kazu, why do you have to be like that?"

"Don't push me. I'm already so fragile."

"Okay, but I'm not strong either."

"Are you feeling overwhelmed? If you're distressed, I'll do whatever I can to help. Hopefully things don't get to an extreme, though."

Mia pursed her lips and sat in silence for a few moments before openly answering. "I'm all right, as of now."

I let out a breath in relief. She could coolly evaluate her own state. Maybe Arisu, Tamaki, and even myself were beginning to lose our mental endurance.

We must be. We've had to battle such a harsh war.

But this odd girl, Mia, she's been calm the entire time. Her comments usually come off as silly and sometimes thoughtless, but that's how she shows her composure.

Honestly, we're all quite a handful, like siblings.

That's why I wanted her to observe us calmly from a little distance. I think if everyone was too involved, we'd end up falling into a trap somewhere. Mia would discover that trap and warn us in advance.

So, I was sorry to ask her, but I had to make a request. "Be our stopper. Mia, I think you can do it calmly."

"You're pretty sadistic and strong. I can't resist teasing you."

"But you're much more sadistic than me..."

Mia cutely tilted her head and handed me a rope and handcuffs.

"I can be an M too, you know? Do you want to tie me up and hit me?"

"That's not what I meant."

I lightly flicked Mia's forehead once more.

We all crossed our legs and took a breather. We spoke of the epic adventure we had last night and shared stories about Mia's brother, like how amazing he was. I also confessed to them that I used to be bullied by my classmates.

"I know," Mia said, causing me and everyone else to look up in surprise. "I visited my brother at the high school often. I saw how people harassed you."

"But you didn't say anything yesterday..."

"If I had, you wouldn't have trusted me."

That made sense, but still...

We both calmly discussed what happened last night and how to move forward.

"For someone who'd been through all that, you seemed surprisingly..." Mia shook her head as she trailed off. "Regardless of the past, you were already a good leader here. So, it doesn't matter."

Although I knew that, she bravely committed to putting her life in my hands.

She's amazing...

"My brother talked about you too."

"What'd he say?"

"He said you had the eyes of a wolf that would defeat the Shiba bully one day."

My goodness, he knows so much about me. Who is he?

Hmm, he's some kind of ninja...

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 19	SUPPORT MAGIC: 5
SUMMONING MAGIC: 6	SKILL POINTS: 2

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Scarcely after getting back to our initial spot from our foray to the white room, two enormous wasps flung needles at Mia and Tamaki. Tamaki raised her sizable shield to guard Mia from the onslaught from above. Even without having a specific skill for protection, Tamaki and her physical endurance at a single rank endured that kind of attack effortlessly.

Three orcs with green skin emerged from the trees around them, brandishing bows and aiming arrows directly at Tamaki. They all shot at once. Though the shield is broad, there's only one way it can be directed. But Archer Orcs were encircling Tamaki and Mia from three different directions, leaving them vulnerable.

That was... if Mia did nothing.

"Air Blast!"

Mia cast a Rank 1 spell, stirring the air and causing it to change the arrows' trajectory. One arrow flew dangerously close before sinking into the ground, while Tamaki blocked another with her large shield. The last arrow was met with the slashing of Tamaki's sword; she cleaved it in half with a silver flash.

Whoa! Is this some kind of shonen manga? Is this the power of Rank 7? Have we become so powerful in such little time? The General Orc put up quite a fight when we faced him early that evening, yet by midnight he no longer intimidated us.

Shonen Jump manga readers were no strangers to the rapid growth of characters. How had we been given such power to expand so quickly? Every day brought more transformation and change as our bodies reached new dimensions. There wasn't time to think about that now, though. There was a fight to be won.

Shiki was still in hiding, so I gave instructions in her place.

"Takahashi-san and Saikami-san, use fire on that swarm of bees. Arisu, try to take out the archer up in the tree with your javelin."

"Right!"

The two with Fire Magic threw their Flame Arrows, which easily penetrated one rank of magic barriers. Arisu tried hurling her javelin, but the archer hid behind the tree, causing Arisu to stop abruptly.

"Aww, it's no use..."

According to what we knew, if a person threw a spear and had both the Throwing skill and the Spearmanship skill at equal ranks, the Throwing skill would be most beneficial. In other words, using the Spearmanship skill for spear throwing was only one aspect of it.

The laptop on the white room's table did not mention how much worse Arisu's javelin throw power was compared to her main skill. Judging from Arisu's and Tamaki's behavior, it probably wasn't lower than Rank 2, like a familiar. It was true that Arisu's javelin throw didn't pack as much punch as a close combat attack with a stabbing weapon. But it was hard to fight enemies who were smart enough to take cover from long-range attacks. Ugh, the archer

was so smart... I couldn't believe it was the same species as those who were preoccupied enough with rape that they exposed their vulnerable backsides.

No, their skin color is different, and they might have even been different species. We called them Archer Orcs but maybe they were something else.

Mia was amazing; she ran to the base of the tree where Archer was hiding and used Pass Wall to make a huge hole in it, splitting it in half. Tamaki expertly took out the orc as it fell down. *This isn't a game—if there's an enemy taking cover, just eliminate the cover itself.* That's Mia's logical way of fighting.

The remaining two tried to escape, bouncing from tree to tree, but Arisu was waiting and threw a javelin to impale one of the creatures and put it out of its misery.

The orc was too far away for me to reach it with a throw, but just then a knife embedded itself into its back. It had been from Shiki, who had been lying in wait in the forest from the start, expecting an escape attempt.

"That worked out," she said, stepping out from behind the trees with a calm demeanor. She had positioned herself perfectly.

Nagatsuki ran over to the fallen orc and drove a spear right into it to end its life. Whenever she killed an orc, she got a strange and crazy smile on her face. It was quite unnerving.

As for the Giant Wasp squad, that was taken care of too; about three Flame Arrows were needed to take each one down. It was hard to aim accurately when those monsters were flying around like that.

Using Fire Bomb with a fire magic rank of 3 would have expedited the task, but unleashing an inferno in the forest was a worrying thought. Sparks could fly into the parched grass and induce a wildfire that would be devastating.

We collected the gems. The Giant Wasps dropped three red gems, just like before. The Archer Orcs also had three red gems.

Chapter 67: Conquer the Northern Forest - Part 3

We had made it out of the first battle unscathed. Shiki set out to survey the northeast area, and as a measure of caution, I released a crow to the east. Unfortunately, after a few minutes, my connection with the bird was lost. One of the giant wasps we knew were present in that region had probably killed it. Fortunately, we had been lucky during our initial reconnaissance mission—the crow had stayed at a low altitude, saving it from the threat of being attacked by a giant insect.

"I'm worried about the high-level area," I said.

"Yeah. My brother will probably manage to do something about it," Mia said calmly.

Indeed, he seemed like he could find a way.

"I'm just worried whether he can even get over the wall to it. If he manages that, I'm sure he'll take care of the rest himself," Mia added on.

"It's true. Ninjas are incredible!" Tamaki said cheerfully.

Mia, however, was not so sure, raising an eyebrow and frowning in confusion. "Hmmm."

After about a ten-minute wait, Shiki returned from her scouting mission. She had gone northeast, yet she had returned from the west.

"The nearer we get to them, the more careful they become. Let's aim for areas with isolated enemies, and I'll lead you there," she said.

With her expertise as our guide, the party advanced toward the orc stronghold from the western side. There were only three archers guarding the area—it would be simple so long as there weren't any bees nearby. We could catch them off guard in a surprise attack. Our gang took down one group while Shiki and her team handled another.

"We can handle this small amount of troops," she commented. "The problem is that soon we won't find any easy ones like these."

"Is it because they have a lot of troops?"

"No, it's more that they are strategically placed. They're far enough apart to coordinate with the other forces."

They're using wisdom, or maybe something else? Maybe the net is getting tighter as we get closer to the enemy's stronghold?

"I'm not sure if we're actually near their main base. We don't want to stray too deep in our mission and end up surrounded with nowhere to retreat," she said.

"That's smart." I didn't want to put too much pressure on Shiki-. If things got rough, it was better to turn around and escape.

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In the next battle, we launched a strong attack on a group of two Giant Wasps and three Archer Orcs. However, there was another group right near this Group A. Group B consisted of two Giant Wasps and two archers, and it would be impossible to fight without being noticed. Furthermore, there was another squadron near Group B. I called that Group C. Fortunately, these three groups were the only ones bunched up, so there weren't any more chain reactions to worry about.

"Let's change our thinking. Let's assume that the enemy will keep pouring in reinforcements and take them on one at a time," she said.

Of course, this meant that if the enemy started to retreat, we would scatter and run.

Shiki alone might not be able to take down the fleeing enemies. Worried about this, Mia decided to move together with Shiki this time. Their role was to definitively crush the fleeing enemies. Various earth and wind spells for restraining would be perfect for hindering movements.

With Mia gone, we had no choice but to go with the frontal attack. So, I suggested strategies such as Tamaki's shield giving us cover while our flame arrows were fired from beyond its protection, my familiars being sent out to the front lines to protect the others from harm, and two more Wind Elementals joining so that there was a total of three.

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The fight kicked off with us inching forward, huddling behind Tamaki's large shield for protection. The archers saw us and sent out a never-ending shower of arrows. Our plan to hide behind the shield failed as the two spellcasters who specialize in fire magic panicked at the flurry of arrows.

My three Wind Elementals soared into the sky and attack them from above, disrupting their launch. With no more arrows coming, the fire users finally reveal themselves. Arisu shoots her Flame Arrows at the Giant Wasps on the ground, causing their wings to catch fire and drop downwards.

"Group B is here!" Arisu yelled out.

We looked up to see two Giant Wasps flying toward us, followed by a group of archers. Group C was in the distance and would be easier to deal with if we could take care of the others first. So, I called out that I'd use myself as a decoy and advance with my javelin.

I climbed a nearby tree and chucked my javelin at the Giant Wasp. Unfortunately, it missed. The creature moved too quickly for my inexperienced throw. But it was enough to draw its attention. It stuck out its stinger and prepared to shoot. That was when I shouted to Arisu, "Now!"

"Y-Yes!"

Arisu threw her javelin right on target, killing the wasp instantly. The other one was roasted alive by our two Fire Mages, while two archers from Group B opened fire. Meanwhile, my familiars took out all three of Group A's archers in one swift movement and Mia leveled up without doing anything.

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In the white room, we filled in Mia, who had been hiding during the mission.

"Man, I really lucked out this time by leveling up without even doing anything," she commented.

"You always get into these kinds of situations," I said. Even though I cast support spells and summoned familiars that helped us actively, I mostly just observed.

"Mia, are you going to increase your Earth Magic?" We already knew she had six skill points available—enough to raise either her Rank 3 Wind Magic or Rank 4 Earth Magic.

"Well, Kazu and the others have surpassed me in level so if I upgrade one more, I can catch up, but..." Mia crossed her arms and groaned. Was she having trouble deciding?

"Given the circumstances now, I think Wind Magic might be better," she said at last. "Oh, so how about Fly?"

Rank 4 Wind Magic included the long-awaited flying magic, Fly. It lasted about two to three minutes per rank, so its duration was eight to twelve minutes at Rank 4. There was also the flying magic Wing, which was rank six and lasted for twenty to thirty minutes, but it required the wings on the user's back to be constantly moving, so it was quite tricky.

Compared to Wing, someone using Fly could levitate with just a thought and move freely in all directions, making it more advantageous in combat. I concluded that Fly was the better choice for battles against archers in the forest or giant wasps that flew at us.

However, I had an alternative in mind.

"With Earth Magic, we can use Blood Boil to boil the enemy's blood or Rock Fall to drop a large boulder on them and kill them first," I said.

"If it's just weak enemies, Blood Boil should be fine, but the stronger ones will resist. In that case, something like Sleeping Song can be used to drop them from a tree. Offensive magic is certainly useful, but wouldn't it be better if Arisu-chan or Tamaki-chan flew in and attacked from the air?" Mia made a convincing argument. There was nothing wrong with what she said.

Hey Mia, you're still in middle school right? You were in elementary school just six months ago. For your age, you seem to have similar capabilities as your older brother... The depressing thought crossed my mind, but I chose not to dwell on it. All that mattered was that we could count on Mia's judgement.

"What the optimal solution was yesterday may not be the same today," she said calmly, impressing both Arisu and Tamaki. We knew she could handle it, so we gave her the wind magic.

Mia	
LEVEL: 11	EARTH MAGIC: 4
WIND MAGIC: 3 → 4	SKILL POINTS: 2

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Mia raised the rank of her Wind Magic and returned to our original location immediately. My summoned creatures, who had just wiped out Group A, were now being bombarded with arrows fired from Group B's archers. One of them endured a multitude of hits and became severely wounded.

I called for all the creatures to retreat and then said to Arisu, Sakura and Tamaki, "Let's move backwards and set up the shield!"

We started moving away slowly. The orcs from Group B merged with Group C, making it our most formidable enemy yet with four wasps and five archers. If we had recklessly run into them, it would have ended tragically for us. Fortunately for us, it was our turn to strike back. Three archers kept shooting arrows at Tamaki's large shield while the other two targeted my summoned creatures that weren't hiding behind the shield. The Wind Elemental that had already been injured could not withstand the attack and disappeared with a high-pitched shriek, breaking into pieces like glass.

Ugh, this isn't the outcome I wanted! But at least nobody died.

The giant wasp flew straight towards us with its stinger pointed in our direction.

"Arisu!" I shouted.

She threw her javelin, while the girls with Fire Magic shot flame arrows from their hands.

Two familiars rushed into the air to protect us from the four huge needles that were going to stab us from above. One Wind Elemental took a needle in its body and was sent staggering back, while the other received needles on its head and shoulders, causing it to vanish. Grateful for their bravery, I thanked them silently in my heart.

The last needle hung in the air menacingly, but then Tamaki stepped in. With strength of spirit worthy of her Rank 7, she swung her silver sword above her head and split the needle into two halves. As expected, she was unbeatable.

Thus, thanks to the concentrated fire from our rear guard, the four wasps that had managed to escape our initial attack were destroyed. All that was left were those five archers—but then they turned their backs and started to run away.

"Hey, don't go!" Tamaki shouted.

Of course, they were running away. Of those five, our concentrated fire of fire magic managed to take down one, but the remaining four were out of range. This was where the ambush came in. Shiki threw her dagger from behind cover, and Mia called forth a tornado with her Wind Magic Rank 4 Whirlwind spell, trapping the three archers in a windy prison. We used Sleeping Song on them one by one until they all fell asleep and tumbled ungracefully off the trees like squished tomatoes.

One survivor tried to escape by circling around the tornado. My familiar, Wind Elemental, caught up to him. The spirit of wind punched its back with a purple electric-charged fist. The Archer Orc convulsed before it could leap away.

The green-skinned Orc lost its balance and fell headfirst to the ground.

Shiki appeared and let out a sigh of relief. "We managed to wipe them all out, didn't we?"

Everyone let out a breath together.

Chapter 68: Conquer the Northern Forest - Part 4

Having broken through the second defense line without too much damage, I had unfortunately lost two of my Wind Elementals.

Summoning a Rank 5 familiar consumed 25 MP, and with my current Level 19 status, I would need to rest for approximately thirty minutes in order to be replenished. However, we couldn't spare that amount of time while still deep in enemy territory. We needed to keep up our combat strength as well, so I immediately summoned two new Wind Elementals, while Arisu healed the wounded survivor with her ample supply of MP. My own reserves were around sixty or seventy from natural recovery alone—we wanted to avoid any further familiars being lost due to lack of MP.

Shiki returned after scouting ahead.

"There are too many of them up ahead. Looks like we'll have to rely on force."

"How many are there?"

"Something like eight or maybe ten Archer Orcs, six Giant Wasps, and twenty orcs on the ground."

Should we turn around and think of another plan?

No, we got this far, even if they detect our attack, it doesn't make a difference. The orc camp must be close by. We charge in without fear and eliminate them.

"Arisu and Tamaki will go in for a swift attack."

"Wait, Kazu-kun. That's too risky," Shiki pleaded.

I glanced at her and noticed that she was smiling deviously. Ah yes. She would be the one who blocked their attacks while I explained the plan. How conniving of her.

"My idea is to use Mia's Wind Magic, Wind Walk, to create a tornado and minimize the archers' arrows. After that, Arisu and Tamaki will swoop in and charge. We still need to tackle the bees and smaller orcs, though. My familiars and Sakura should be able to defeat them, especially because Sakura improved her Spearmanship skill to Rank 3 after our last battle. Like Arisu, Sakura is a true fighter: she won't back down when facing weaker enemies."

I continued as everyone listened intently. "Fortunately, Shiki-san, who has long-range attacks, and the two who use fire magic should be able to handle the bees. If we fight head-on without worrying about any of the enemies escaping, our chances of winning are greater. That means they might come back with more reinforcements... but if we push them into their base and keep them from leaving the forest, that problem should be solved. Meanwhile, Tamaki will fight against the boss, if he ever shows up. But if Tamaki can't win, then that means it's hopeless for us. My intuition also says that if there was someone stronger than the General Orc, they wouldn't move far away from their base. After all, they would have attacked our own base yesterday if they were truly powerful."

Of course, there was also the possibility that this powerful, freely-moving force appeared this morning, like the bees, but if that was the case, there was nothing we can do.

Shiki and I understood this through eye contact.

We both nodded at each other.

"Got it. There's a risk, but it's a necessary expense."

After a moment, Shiki gave another nod, this time in assent.

The plan was decided.

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Out of nowhere, a tornado appeared and a Flame Arrow shot through the sky, burning one of the Giant Wasps. The orcs jumped into action, trying to defend themselves against the looming threat. Suddenly, Arisu and Tamaki were overhead, their bodies marked with red traces of Haste. They flew straight for

the archers in the trees, but the strong wind messed with their aim and they missed. Without her large shield, this time Tamaki was relying on speed to take care of one enemy at least.

I was the one carrying that large shield on my back.

It was really, *seriously* heavy. I stumble as I try to catch up with my advancing companions.

Sakura, who turned around, offered to carry it for me.

"No, stay focused on the orcs," I told her, gazing at the small enemies scrambling between the trees ahead of us. She nodded and tightened her grip on her spear.

"I'll get my elemental to take care of the rear guard. Feel free to move around freely," I added, but she had already taken off before I finished speaking. Using only her weapon, she flew into the orc horde, sending them into chaos with every blow.

Meanwhile, our group was dealing with a flock of giant wasps flying in from above. Shiki stood in plain sight, throwing things to capture their attention, while the fire-wielding magic users unleashed Flame Arrows from behind me as I sheltered them with my large shield.

Hey, why are they both hiding behind me? I can't see them well... but it's fine. I'm Level 19 now, nearly five times the level of Shiki and the others. Even if I get hit by arrows or needles, I won't die so easily. Since I won't be doing much during the battle, I might as well be a meat shield. The worst thing would be for my allies to die protecting me. It's better for me to experience a little pain than for them to die. I don't want to watch another person die like Akane Shimoyamada.

Mia fired off Flame Arrows, taking down giant wasps one after another. She also spun a few tornadoes that helped subdue the archers. Tamaki and Arisu flew from target to target among the archers, swiftly ending their opponents before setting their sights elsewhere.

Neither of them had practiced flying in the white room before they tried it, but they handled it like pros. It was incredible how well they controlled soaring

through the air without prior experience.

"Whoa, whoa, whoaaa! I can't stop!" Just as Tamaki shouted in a panic, she passed by the next archer and then continued straight into the air, disappearing somewhere.

"Hey, come back here!"

Arisu, on the other hand, slowed down a bit and smoothly took down the second target before changing direction. She handled it like a pro, which meant she'd probably get her driver's license with little trouble.

On the other hand, Tamaki behind the wheel was frightening to imagine.

Oh, here she comes again. She flew towards the third archer with impressive speed... only to veer off track.

"Ugh, this is so annoying!"

Tamaki slammed her foot into a nearby tree, pivoting to change her direction midair. Spinning like a top, she crashed into the third archer, sword held firmly in front of her. It was a daring attack and it paid off with a sword through the gut of an Archer Orc—along with a level-up for her.

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Back in the white room, Tamaki hung her head in despair. Arisu was trying to cheer her up; meanwhile, Mia was in hysterics, laughing uncontrollably and clutching her stomach.

"This is the best!" she exclaimed between belly laughs. "Tamaki, you're hilarious."

"Don't laugh too hard," I replied with a gentle pat on her head. Then I turned my attention to Tamaki, running my hand through her hair, trying to comfort her. When she lifted her head again, I saw tears in her eyes.

"Ugh, Kazu-san... I..."

Ah, she's in one of those "I'm useless" moods now. Her puppy-dog eyes bore into my soul, so I continued reassuring her that everything would be okay.



"We won't leave you behind over this. We might as well train while we're here," I reassured her.

"I'll practice my hardest," Tamaki said.

"I'll practice some more while we're here. Don't you slack off either, Mia," Arisu said.

Mia nodded in agreement.

One thing became clear: Mia was the best at flying among the four of us here.

"This is quite fun..."

She had previously mentioned liking sports, hadn't she?

And of course, I was the worst at flying. Even Tamaki seemed worried about how I'd feel.

"Don't let it get you down. Not being able to fly shouldn't be a problem for you."

"That's not necessarily true. There could be times when we have to fly across a cliff or something... Hm, for now, we'll just use griffons if we need to fly somewhere," I replied.

I performed a Rank 6 Summoning spell and summoned a Griffon, an immense bird with white and black-brown speckled feathers. It was two sizes larger than a horse, with a wingspan of about eight meters when extended. The griffon noticed me before letting loose a loud cry. Its flapping wings dispelled a gust of wind into the room.

"Wow, it's amazing. Hey, Kazu, I wanna ride it!"

"Sure. But now that I think about it, there isn't enough space in this room for the griffon to fly."

"Awww, bummer."

So, we postponed our plan of riding the griffon and instead spent time training each other in flight. We swapped pointers on how to stay afloat and refine our aerial aptitude.

In the end, my flying still wasn't very good.

"When we fly together, I'll hold your hand," Tamaki said, back in good spirits. She had been awful at first, but she soon got used to the movements of flying through three dimensions. I felt like I was being judged harshly for my lack of aptitude, but I couldn't really argue with that—I was just glad Tamaki was feeling better.

I sighed, and Arisu smiled at me. "We fight so you don't have to," she said.

"If I have to fight, then we've already lost," I replied.

"That's why you should focus on using your head."

I nodded my agreement, and we returned. Tamaki conserved her skill points.

TAMAKI	
LEVEL: 17	SWORDSMANSHIP: 7
STRENGTH: 1	SKILL POINTS: 5

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Back on the battlefield, Arisu pierced another archer's throat with a single blow. Arisu leveled up, but we had nothing do in the white room again so soon, so we left immediately.

ARISU	
LEVEL: 17	SPEARMANSHIP: 5
HEALING MAGIC: 5	SKILL POINTS: 4

We kept up our progress. Shiki's party had apparently all leveled up by now, and Sakura even achieved Rank 4 in Spearmanship. She practically slaughtered the front line of orcs single-handedly, while I made my trio of Wind Elementals

eliminate the two orcs that were coming towards me. Knowing they wouldn't be able to survive, the leftover orcs scurried into the forest. I told everyone not to follow too far; it was dangerous to expand the formation beyond what we were able to take on. Finally, Tamaki managed to hit an archer, her flying more stable at this point, which concluded our battle.

"Seems like a few archers and around seven or eight orcs managed to escape," Shiki said.

Chapter 69: Conquer the Northern Forest - Part 5

Shiki, who had gone on a scouting mission, reappeared after a few minutes and reported that she'd found a cave.

"A cave?" Arisu asked, her hand at her mouth in surprise. "I've never heard of such a thing in this vicinity before."

"But you and Tamaki explored these woods around the school, right?"

"Yes, but we haven't examined every corner of it. We also never went into the prohibited area in the back," she answered.

The rear part of the mountain by both the middle and high school was entirely off-limits. In the past, people would hunt roaming wild boars there.

That might have been how Shiba had gotten access to a rifle, leaving it stored with the school's possessions.

Thus, students were always warned not to venture too far into the forest.

It was rather strange that a school would be built here, but I imagined there were probably many factors that influenced this decision, like safety regulations and parental demands.

Most of us students don't know much about our surroundings, since we were discouraged from exploring the grounds too far from campus.

"Was that cave where the orcs were hiding?"

"I think so. We saw around ten of them standing at the entrance when we got close. They seemed quite flustered, as if they had just noticed us."

Shiki told us that two orcs had assumed leadership among the force. We could see it was a base of some sort. "The archers perched in the trees and the two giant wasps flying around serve as sentry," I said, noting the small size of their army. "We can't turn back now."

I thought about our options for a moment before suggesting, "Mia, do you think you could use an earth magic spell to create a stone wall blocking access to the cave?"

Mia hesitated a bit. "It's definitely an option, but what about if Tamaki-chan stands at the entrance of the cave with a big shield and launches lightning from the back?"

My companion had some outrageous suggestions. It was an aggressive plan, but it could work. Except that Tamaki wouldn't be able to fight a General Orc alone. The big shield would come in handy when dealing with flying projectiles but in a battle against a general, it'd just be a nuisance.

"So, let's summon an Iron Golem to hold up the shield while Tamaki is close by."

"Sounds like a good plan, Kazu-kun. I'm worried about your MP, though."

I'd be even more of a burden if I spent my time running around during battle. I don't want to risk using Reflection magic either.

Having laid out a strategy, I summoned my Iron Golem, a familiar of Summoning Magic Rank 6 and used spells to enhance its strength. I handed Tamaki the enormous shield and watched it effortlessly lift it with one hand.

"Go ahead with the Iron Golem first, blocking off the entrance to the cave," I ordered. "Tamaki, Arisu, and all of you eliminate anyone who stands in our way."

The Iron Golem lumbered forward, surprisingly swift for its size. Its giant metallic form quickly earned the attention of archers in the trees who began launching arrows at it. But thanks to the raised shield, none of them penetrated through.

"Move forward!" I yelled.

Tamaki, Arisu, and Sakura dashed out from the Golem's shadow. Arisu and Sakura kicked and scattered the weaker orcs, and Tamaki hurled herself at one of the elite orcs to direct and command it.

"I'll show you what I'm made of!" Tamaki yelled as she decapitated one of the powerful orcs with a single strike.

Then Mia leveled up without any input, and after a brief conversation, she returned to the original location.

Mia	
LEVEL: 12	EARTH MAGIC: 4
WIND MAGIC: 4	SKILL POINTS: 4

As the orcs faded away, we were alarmed by a commotion coming from inside the cave.

"It makes sense that there would still be enemies in there."

"It's within our expectations. We have to hurry and reduce their numbers before reinforcements arrive."

Mia, Shiki, and two fire magic users attacked the Giant Wasp. The surprise attack knocked two of its bees down to the ground. Taking advantage of the chaos, Mia cast Sleeping Song on an archer perched in a tree, causing them to fall off and hit the ground headfirst with a sickening thud.

Mia uttered with a wry smile, "Hmm, sleep is justice."

It seemed the sleeping spell was particularly effective in this situation. Perhaps it was because of the vast difference in power between Mia and her foe or maybe because of the sheer strength of her magic that had yet to falter against any light enemies.

This type of enchantment must not work on opponents with somewhat higher rankings, as it only had a considerable effect on low-leveled baddies. The tales about Mia using this sorcery on powerful adversaries were well known, but none of them could withstand it. As for the Giant Wasps, which were insects, they were immune from the start because it was revealed at a Q&A

that creatures with bodies unlike humans could not be captivated by incantations.

Tamaki had already defeated the other top-level foe. The Iron Golem stood at the entrance of the cave, its shield protecting it from behind. The archer’s arrows were bouncing off of its back, but the beast was still very much alive. Mia knew it was dangerous to leave it that way, but she couldn’t risk fighting the archer now—she had other jobs to do.

"Mia," Tamaki said, "use your Lightning spell in the cave. I’ll take care of the archer."

"No problem," she replied. "I got this."

Mia began sprinting as I directed the three remaining Wind Elementals to rush at the archer perched in the tree. It was so focused on the Elemental creatures heading toward it that it didn’t realize the Iron Golem was also nearby. My Iron Golem still went down, but thanks to its Rank 5 familiar status, it was able to throw a few arrows before it was defeated.

The Wind Elementals and archer then squared off in close quarters combat. Arisu took out one more tiny orc monster, while I gained my Level 20. We kept our stay in the white room brief, exchanging some ideas before returning.

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 20	SUPPORT MAGIC: 5
SUMMONING MAGIC: 6	SKILL POINTS: 4

As we left the white room, four Giant Wasps ambushed us from the side. Their giant bodies and enormous stingers were enough to send a terrifying chill down my spine. I stepped forward in front of the girls and prepared to use Reflection at any moment.

"Now, Burning Rain!" Shiki commanded. Both fire magic users responded, instantly sending a torrent of flames down towards the oncoming wasps. Even

from where I stood, I felt the intense heat from the inferno as it consumed the menacing creatures. Their wings burned up as they lay lifeless on the ground.

"Wow, that was brutal..." Although I had anticipated it somewhat, fire magic became incredibly destructive as the rank increased. I put out the fire that almost spread to the ground with Summon Water.

By the way, Burning Rain was Rank 4 Fire Magic, which the girls just learned after leveling up earlier.

While we were preventing the fire from spreading, the Wind Elementals cut down and defeated the archers they were facing.

The other weakling orcs attempted to flee, but Sakura and Arisu relentlessly chased after them and took care of them all. It was a piece of cake this time, thanks to our plan of blocking the escape route of the cave.

But the true test began now. Mia was casting bolts of lightning within the cave, and shouts of pain were echoing from inside, along with sounds of something collapsing.

Suddenly, Mia took a step back and screamed, "Something's coming out!"

I signaled to my Iron Golem to move aside for a moment.

Before anything could happen, someone leaped out of the shadows. The figure was a dark orc wielding a dangerous weapon known as a flail, a chain with a silver metal ball at one end and a handle that he used to swing it around his head.

The dark orc prepared to hit the Iron Golem's chest with the flail, but Tamaki blocked it. Her silver sword glistened in the sunlight as she shouted, "General! Your opponent is me!" A wave of energy swept through the air and pushed the Iron Golem away.

Now, this is the main event... the final battle.

Chapter 70: Final Battle in Front of the Northern Forest Cave

A General Orc arrived—the third one since yesterday. This one held a flail in hand. Although orcs with clubs had been attacking us, this was something different. A flail typically consisted of a spiked iron ball connected to a handle with a chain, similar to those used by priests in the *Dragon Quest* games. Swinging around such weight seemed much more troublesome than wielding a sword or something else.

"Tamaki, can you handle this?"

"Leave it to me, Kazu-san! This'll be a piece of cake..."

Tamaki's laughter was cut short when the flail smacked her squarely in the stomach. She flew back and was unresponsive for a moment.

"Tamaki!" I yelled, trying to rush to her aid, but Mia held me back. "She seems fine," she said as Tamaki got up, groaning and rubbing her stomach.

Tamaki looked back at us. "I-I just dropped my guard. I'm all good."

Seems like she wasn't too badly hurt after all—thank goodness!

Oh man, I let my focus slip there for a second. That was way too close!

I breathed a sigh of relief, then looked to the general.

The large orc with dark skin had struck another blow against the Iron Golem and now surveyed the area warily. Was it not giving chase because it figured Tamaki wasn't a threat? It thought it had quickly vanquished Tamaki. I couldn't guess what luck lay ahead...

"Arisu, can you keep the general busy for a while?" I asked.

"Y-Yes!"

I mustered whatever MP remained and cast Deflection Spell, followed by Haste.

A red glow enveloped Tamaki, Arisu, Mia, me, and our familiars.

Arisu dashed forward at the general, making sure to stay out of range of his flail. She thrust her spear at his feet but he stepped back, swinging the silver ball in response. She quickly retreated, always keeping an eye on the projectile as it swung around. It was a millimeter-by-millimeter battle, and I was barely keeping up. As long as Arisu kept, her distance, we'd be all right.

Mia released her hold on me and gave me a nod, signaling me to go ahead. I rushed over to Tamaki, offering my shoulder for support.

"Can you still fight?" I asked...

"I-I'm okay like this." She spat out a mixture of sand and blood.

At Level 17, Tamaki had proven time and again to be resilient. The Hard Weapon-equipped breastplate I gave her probably helped too.

That said, the breastplate's initial gleam was gone, replaced with deep dents. I wasn't sure if Repair Metal would be enough to fix it. Anxieties about Tamaki having internal injuries swirled through my mind.

The sunlight shining through the trees wasn't enough to give me a good look at the color of Tamaki's complexion, but her voice sounded as lively as usual, so I didn't think there was a problem...

"I won't be careless. First, I'll pay attention to the enemy's movement patterns," she said.

"If you understand that, then why'd you get hit in the first place? I was really worried, you know."

"I-I'll take more care next time!"

Tamaki growled in frustration before charging towards the general with her silver sword. She managed to land a glancing blow, which cut through his clothing and drew a thin stream of blue blood over his chest.

With the Haste spell, Tamaki would have the advantage when it came to pure power. If she learned to fight more strategically, like she did last night, then

she'd dominate this battle. However, as we all know, Tamaki was usually careless.

Arisu took a few steps back and called out, "Tamaki-chan, I'm going to help you now! Ranged Heal." This healing spell worked at a distance of up to twenty-five meters; far enough for Arisu's current level.

If I only needed to heal a party member from afar, I could cast a deflection magical barrier around the healer and direct it outward, but I couldn't always make sure my hands were free or that I had the highest MP in the group. That's why Ranged Heal was so valuable in an emergency scenario.

As soon as Arisu's healing took effect, Tamaki's movements became much more energetic. Even if it helped with nothing but the pain, it made a significant difference when she was fighting. Then again, maybe feeling some pain would make Tamaki more careful...

"Kazu, you need to stop fretting!"

"Well... I guess."

Mia had returned and was now beside me, laughing in her usual manner. "Will you worry about me even if I get hurt?"

You just lost your arm a day ago.

"I'm begging you! Stay out of harm's way. I don't want you getting hurt," I said.

"I'll do my best to keep myself safe."

It's my fault that everyone around me has been thrown into the thick of battle. With such fierce fights, some injuries would be unavoidable. I was grateful that we were dealing with injuries, not death right now, but... I would still hope for no one to get hurt.

Particularly Arisu, Tamaki and Mia...

Shiki's voice got my attention. "Listen." She was paying close attention to the environment, putting her reconnaissance skills to use.

"The steps seem much lighter than before."

So, not just a minor orc then? Elites and generals had much bigger builds...

Hence, as a preventive measure, I had the Iron Golem stand in front of the cave entrance once again.

Arisu hastened to heal the Iron Golem's wounds and remained vigilant for the enemy nearby.

I decided to use the remainder of my MP to cast Deflection Spell and Resist Elements: Fire. It was meant to counter the Hellhound that might accompany a General Orc. That sucked my magic points dry. I wondered if I'd be able to cast Reflection at all.

Suddenly, Shiki shouted, "Some kind of magic is coming!"

Just then, a bolt of lightning struck the Iron Golem. It practically came out of left field, but then I remembered what I'd learned yesterday—about the orc commander who kidnapped female students from their dormitory, wearing a purple robe.

"Probably a Mage Orc!"

If their magic classification is the same as my skill, they're a Wind Magic user. The lightning they just cast was probably a Rank 3 spell.

If that's the case, the scariest thing is...

"Be careful, Arisu! Sleeping song!" I yelled, and in the next moment, Arisu's body trembled. "Oops," I panicked and rushed to Arisu.

But before I could reach her, Mia used her magic. "Headstone!" Mia cast a stone pellet with force that hit Arisu's head from behind.

"Ow!" Arisu held her head, tears in her eyes, and looked back at Mia. "Ugh, Mia-chan..."

Mia remained calm and muttered, "Watch out in front." Then she cast another spell, Stone Blast. The rain of stone pellets passed by Arisu's side and flew into the depths of the cave.

As soon as I realized our enemy was a Wind Magic user, Mia suggested they were probably using "Resist Wind." We both had similar bestowed magic, but the spells only work for the same attribute rank. For example, "Resist Wind" can

only defend against Wind Magic and so on. Mia must have figured out that earth magic would be effective against an opponent who uses lightning magic. The last spell that hit Arisu from behind felt like something out of one of those video games where you have to wake up a sleeping companion by hitting them. It still gave me chills thinking about it.

So, watching her filled me with a sense of ease, but I also felt sorry for Arisu and her head.

We heard a loud crash from Mia's Stone Blast Mia spell thrown into the cave. A low groaning noise followed it—it must have hit something.

We should attack here with full strength. I watched the clash between the General Orc and Tamaki; they were evenly matched, but Tamaki seemed to be gaining control due to adjusting to the flail attacks. It didn't seem that our help was needed here.

"Arisu, charge into the cave and destroy the sorcerer," I said.

"Yes, sir."

"Sakura, cover us!"

"Got it."

Arisu equipped her spear and raced into the cave. Not far behind, Sakura ran with a flashlight in her left hand. I wanted to use night vision, but I'd already used up my energy. I'd have to think about how to fix that for next time.

"We'll go as support. Kazu, Mia, you two stay here to help Tamaki," Shiki instructed.

The two fire mages each conjured a Ghost Lantern—a free-floating ball of light that could be moved away from them—giving greater illumination than what a flashlight would provide.

I locked eyes with Mia, and she asked, "Do you want to back up Tamaki-chan?"

"No worries. I'll make sure she's got help."

"Then there's no need for us to jump in ourselves."

Good idea.

I paid close attention to the fight between the General Orc and Tamaki. My Iron Golem and three familiars had come to Tamaki's aid to join the fight as well. Each clash of weapons was accented by sparks. Despite Tamaki's fast, nearly invisible sword strikes, the general staved off Tamaki's onslaught.

But not for much longer.

Tamaki moved forward, and General swung his flail in an attempt to stop her—but it failed. The chain connecting the silver ball to the handle shattered, immobilizing the general. Tamaki took this opportunity to rush forward with a powerful slashing attack.

The general staggered, spewing blue blood.

Tamaki showed no compassion, pushing in closer for a second attack. The General, whose chest was already cut open, dropped to the ground and then quickly vanished like fog.

"We did it! We won, Kazu-san!" Tamaki beamed at me with delight. After a few moments, we found ourselves in a bright white room. It must have been Mia's level-up; Arisu must have defeated one of her enemies inside the cave at the same time.

Chapter 71: What Awaits Ahead

In the vacant white room, I questioned Arisu about the enemy she had bested, which appeared to be a Mage Orc.

"I got only a glimpse of it from my flashlight, so I can't confirm its color, but it seemed to be an orc shrouded in robes. It was carrying a staff in its right hand," Arisu stated.

"As the initial report predicted. I wonder if that staff acts like some kind of magical rod," I said.

"Maybe it boosts wind attacks or something," Arisu said.

Mia had a stoic expression on her face. She obviously wanted one for herself. If that weapon truly contained such a remarkable effect, then I'd give it to Mia in a heartbeat.

"What spells did the orc cast?" I asked.

"The enemy used Lightning on me, and it coursed through my body, zapping my nerves and numbing my limbs. Even though I took a hard hit, I was still able to stand up to the monster. It then tried to escape by disappearing into thin air..."

It must have been an Invisibility spell, as you can't move while using that spell.

"I swung my spear randomly, hit the orc in the head, and the enemy fell to the ground. I killed it with a stab to the neck," Arisu explained.

As expected from Arisu. She was quite the warrior. She showed no mercy.

She had excellent judgment.

"Are there any additional enemies inside?" I asked.

"No, none that I saw," she answered. "They could be lurking in the rear... Even if that orc is dead, it's probably turned into a gem now."

Mia released several Lightning bolts into the cave, but we couldn't tell that they had any effect. That was unsettling.

We still didn't know the level of the general. If I had to hazard a guess, it was most likely between 15 and 20.

The mage was probably around Level 10, but I couldn't be sure, it having only used Wind Magic up to Rank 3. According to game mechanics, orcs had a vulnerability to magic spells. We'd learn more soon enough if they kept appearing.

To prepare for a similar event in the future, Arisu should prioritize advancing her Spear Technique ranks, I noted to myself.

Mentioning levels reminded me of Mia...

"I have six skill points, but I'm not sure whether to put them into Earth or Wind Magic." Mia groaned and crossed her arms. It was unusual to see her so serious.

"Kazu, do you have any idea what might happen next?" she asked.

"It's hard to say until we see what lurks deep in the cave. Why those giant wasps appeared this morning is still a mystery, though."

"Yeah, that's true. What about the stone monument at the foot of the mountain? What do you think it's for?"

"Could there be some kind of warp gate connected to it?"

Mia and I shared a look.

"Did you two figure something out? I don't understand anything," Tamaki said.

"Not quite, but the fact that new enemies appeared implies something powerful was born here. The clue seems to be that stone monument," I said.

"I could read it with Language Comprehension. It said, 'Fixed coordinates, spatial search, range limited,'" Mia murmured.

"Ahh, it looks like a warp gate."

"If that's really what it is, what should we do, Kazu? Destroy it?"

"Nope. Ideally, I'd like to safely scout the other side of the gate using remote viewing on my familiar before making any decisions. Ahhh, having a special ops scout is convenient."

My power level was at its peak with these summons, surpassing most opponents. The only problem was that I was no match for them alone. Aha ha, guess I'd just have to stay firmly attached as a leech to the party.

"Shiki-san said something about two reasons for the existence of the warp gate?" I asked Mia.

She groaned in response and then let out an annoyed sigh. She added under her breath, "You're always expecting the unexpected... or at least that's how it was yesterday."

"Geez, you're such a risk-taker, big sis."

"Hey, don't call me that. And you make it sound like I'm some kind of delinquent!"

I got us back on topic. "The two ideas Shiki-san mentioned are 'sender' and 'receiver.' We assumed that someone was using the warp gate as a way of sending reinforcements from their base, but there might be another option. Maybe they were trying to open the warp gate on our end and ship troops off somewhere else. Could the orcs have been trying to get away from this mountain? Maybe that's why they abducted female students—as a sacrifice for some warp gate opening ritual," I said.

"The orcs weren't following orders from the generals or mages properly. They just took over the main base—the middle and high school buildings—and then didn't do much else."

"That might explain why the orcs' actions make no sense. It seems like their commanders didn't bother commanding their lower ranks or preparing them for battle, like they were using them to buy time for a ritual... As for the giant wasps, it could be related to another ritual or perhaps they'd been hibernating until now."

"Or the girls were made into incubators for insect eggs," Mia mused. "It's a common setting in adult games."

"Seems like you know a lot about that, Mia-sensei," Tamaki said.

"Please call me Meister," Mia said with a proud puff of her chest despite only enrolling in elementary school six months ago.

All of this in mind, the bees' presence indicated *something* bad. I could only assume that the orcs were either ready or close to achieving their goal. We had to make haste and obstruct their plans before they became unstoppable. After speaking with Shiki earlier, we agreed to be merciless and foil the orcs' schemes.

I gave a brief description of our mission, and the girls had questions.

"Are we retreating and traveling the world?"

"No, I don't want to broaden our battleground."

I explained further. "Rather than merely reacting, like Japan's Self-Defense Forces, we would fight proactively and aggressively to protect what was important to us—the Cultural Arts Center. We couldn't do more than that yet, but that could change down the road. The most critical thing was to get an accurate understanding of our current state. To acquire information for that..." I trailed off at that.

Arisu and Tamaki look puzzled while Mia appeared content with my explanation.

"If we started out in Russia or Turkey, would we need to head for the Black Sea first?"

"Is that a game reference? Do you really want to be called the brother and sister duo?"

That made Mia's face drop, so I gave her a reassuring pat on the head.

"So, Mia, in the circumstances we discussed, which do you prefer—Wind or Earth Magic?"

"Wind... I think," she replied after a moment of contemplation.

"What's your gut say?"

"Well, considering we don't know what kind of battle it will be, Wind Walk seems appropriate, right?" Mia said.

Wind Walk was an advanced Rank 5 Wind spell which allowed the user to travel *on* air instead of soaring *through* it like Fly. Plus, it lasted twenty to thirty minutes per rank, twenty times longer than Fly.

"Then again," Mia continued, "the Rank 5 Earth Magic spell Vibration Sense could come in handy."

Vibration Sense enabled its user to detect subtle seismic movements. It was perfect for exploring a winding cave like this one.

"If we're traveling for a long time, I can just summon my Griffin," I suggested.

"Mm. That was an option I considered as well. Poison Smog could also be useful. It releases poisonous gas that would kill off small orcs instantly."

Poison Smog was brutal magic and best against large crowds of opponents. Such a noxious weapon would likely be unlawful in our original world, but fortunately international treaties and even military regulations didn't apply here.

It all came down to what Mia intended to use the spell for; if we'd have to face more than a hundred adversaries, then Poison Smog would become an invaluable asset.

"I think we can assume we'll still have to fight off lots of weaker enemies. Then we can leave the few elites to Tamaki," I suggested.

Tamaki stood tall, filled with enthusiasm. I couldn't help but remember her embarrassing mishap earlier...

"It should be fine," Mia said in an unusually gentle tone.

"Okay, I'll do my best!" Tamaki replied.

"There's something almost condescending in your words..." I hesitantly admitted to Mia.

"Um, what?"

"Tamaki, just focus on improving your skills—I'm here to back you up."

"Yeah, okay. As long as Kazu-san and the others are around, I'll be fine," Tamaki said. "Say, why don't I feel very encouraged by your words?"

"What I mean is that we'll be together no matter what."

"Oh, now I get it!"

Tamaki softly giggled, while Arisu and Mia gave a faint grin.

"Right, let's get back on track. We can reach the two remaining Wind Magic spells. To be honest, if we had more time, I'd love to experiment with the Earth Magic spell Create Metal... but it won't raise our battle strength."

"I hear that."

Considering all that, I had no issues with that plan. Mia would continue to prioritize upgrading her wind magic rank.

"I wanna handle gravity and move at the speed of light soon..."

"Don't become a female knight."

I understood what she meant, but close combat really didn't suit Mia.

Mia	
LEVEL: 13	EARTH MAGIC: 4
WIND MAGIC: 4 → 5	SKILL POINTS: 6 → 1

We finished our meeting and increased the rank of Mia's Wind Magic. With that concluded, we left the white room.

Chapter 72: The Secret of the Cave

After returning to where Mia had level up, we decided to put off collecting gems and explore the cavern instead. It wasn't man-made; it was limestone, dripping with water droplets from the stalactites in the ceiling. An unpleasant smell made my nose wrinkle—orcs had been living there for a while.

"Let's have the Fire Magic users and Sakura keep watch outside," Shiki proposed.

"Sure, good idea. If we come across Hellhounds or something similar in the thin passages ahead, they could eliminate us with one breath attack. Better to have those with Fire Magic stay back but use their heat resistance to keep everyone safe. However, if mages launch offensive spells at us, we won't stand a chance unless our levels are high enough," I said.

I'd rather Shiki have stay away, but...

"I'll join Kazu and the others. You guys wouldn't be able to search on your own anyhow," she replied.

I nodded and accepted her help despite it not being proper for the organization's top brass to go out on scouting missions.

Going forward, I wanted to add one more person to the team so they could serve as the scout, and I had just the right person in mind—a certain ninja. Mia's brother would be ideal for this job; he was also a great leader among the high schoolers.

Though he didn't want to necessarily be in the leadership position, he didn't have a choice given the situation. He was a remarkable and skilled individual.

Well, for now, let's move on and try to make it past this obstacle.

"Shiki-san, join us for now so I can use Reflection when needed. Also, you could stand to gain some experience points."

"You won't catch me rejecting a plan to stay alive. No worries, I'll join your party," she said.

With that, the five of us were now united. One student mage cast a Resist Fire spell on Shiki, and with some time my MP had recuperated to 10, enough for me to use the Deflection spell and then Night Sight on everyone, meaning that we no longer needed the Light spell.

"Kazu, can I have this staff?" Mia asked while brandishing a long wooden staff with a crystal embedded at its end that exuded a pale blue color in the light. It was probably some type of magical item.

"I'll keep it just in case," Mia replied after I gave her permission. She was quite small to begin with, and the staff seemed way too large for her to handle properly, but as long as it didn't cause any problems, there wasn't anything wrong with her keeping it.

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Separated from the group of three who stayed behind, we stepped into the depths of the cave. After a short distance, Shiki went on ahead of us.



She returned after a moment and said the path ahead branched off into a Y-shape. "I think I heard a girl's voice coming from the right side," she mentioned.

"Could there still be some people alive?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. It could also be a trap. Don't forget that one of the orcs used Wind Magic," Shiki replied.

Rank 4 Wind Magic had a spell called Create Sound, which replicated any kind of sound—including that of a person talking. The Mage Orc had used Lightning as their primary attack spell, which was Rank 3. The same orc mage could likely use Rank 4 Wind Magic as well.

We have to prepared that this could be an ambush if there was another Mage Orc about. So what should we do?

It was simple—charge in and shatter this trap. "Let's launch a surprise attack. Shiki-san, can you watch our backs?"

Since her battle level was low, we concluded her role was best suited as a sentry at the Y-shaped intersection, which would offer her enough cover to stay out of sight. The rest of us would break ahead and execute our plan.

First, we cast Silent Field on the Iron Golem so it would take all potential traps and ambushes. With the spell covering it, it strode ahead of us by about ten steps. Silent Field's effect was extensive enough to muffle any noise from our footsteps.

Even though we didn't know the situation ahead, we could judge what to do based on the Iron Golem. After walking for a while on the winding road to the right, the Iron Golem suddenly stopped. It must have reached a plaza. Its body swayed unsteadily, and then we realized—there was a hole in the ground of the cave. The Iron Golem's thick leg had stepped into the pitfall by accident.

"What?! A pitfall?!" I stopped dead in my tracks, stunned. Arrows flew at the Iron Golem from all directions. Most of them deflected off its steel body, yet a few managed to find their way through its joints, disabling one of its legs and sending it plunging into the hole. We got our first glimpse of what lay ahead: an army of archers—at least ten from the number of arrows sent towards us. This was *bad*. My brain snapped back into gear. I issued orders for three Wind

Elementals to charge forward, and I told Arisu and Tamaki to follow behind them.

"Mia," I shouted, "cast Whirlwind!"

At once Mia cast her Rank 4 spell, creating a large tornado in the plaza beyond the pitfall, blowing the arrows away. The Wind Elementals rushed forth into the plaza immediately after that.

The archers let loose a barrage of arrows at the Wind Elementals, most of which veered off course as they were blocked by the tornado. I quickly split them to either side—two left, one right.

"Arisu and Tamaki, follow me!"

"Yes!"

"Okay!"

Arisu and Tamaki hurried past the trap, sprinting toward the archer in the back. All of a sudden, an intense heat filled the hall. Tamaki gasped and dropped her silver sword.

Arisu surveyed their surroundings. "Behind the hedge to our right is a Mage Orc!"

"I see it," I said. "Heat Metal!"

It dawned on me what happened to Tamaki. Yesterday, Mia disabled her attacker by heating up the metal handle of their weapon until they dropped it. This time, the Rank 2 Earth Magic spell Heat Metal was being used *against* them.

Tamaki was in danger. Without her weapon, she was just like a helpless student.

"Mia, conceal them!" I quickly instructed.

"Got it. Dark Sphere!"

Mia reached the entrance of the hall and waved her wand, creating a dark area that engulfed Arisu and Tamaki, hiding them from the mage's view. Dark Sphere was a higher level Wind Magic spell than Smog, which produced smoke

that only obstructed visibility. Dark Sphere instead created a cube-shaped space that was totally black, meaning that night vision wouldn't work either. The caster could adjust the area the spell covered, but its maximum size was five meters to a side. It lasted ten minutes before it automatically dissipated.

Mia worked her magic, trying to trap the mage with the staff in her right hand.

I was running towards Mia when I asked, "So you can cast magic from the staff?"

"The tip of the staff seems to be able to direct magic. Is a visual confirmation easier?"

I guess that makes sense. It would be more accurate and easier to control. I turned my gaze around the hall. It was a big place, about thirty meters wide, with several pillars connecting to the ceiling for support. I couldn't see any other exits within its depths except for the entrance we came from. The path branching off this side was clearly a dead end. Dark spheres scattered throughout cloaked the right side of the room, while a tornado kicked up sand in front of us. Tamaki and Arisu charged at eight archers on one side, and two Wind Elementals fought five archers to another, and one Wind Elemental squared off against four archers elsewhere.

Arisu and Tamaki were too busy fighting the monsters to notice what was hidden in the back corner of the cave. And in that case, it was their lucky day, because they didn't see the huge, fleshy lump—two or three meters high, five meters wide—pulse with human organs.

"What's that?" A chill shot down my spine. I shuddered.

Mia stepped forward, signaling me to follow her gaze until mine froze on the center of the lump. There lay the face of a girl with vacant eyes, her features twisted in agony as if she'd let out a low, muffled scream. Ah, so this was the fate of the female student who had been brought here—a sacrificial offering. I finally understood why Shiki heard a voice earlier.

Chapter 73: Sacrificial Girls

The whereabouts of at least one hundred to three hundred female students from both the middle school and high school were unknown. Witnesses from the middle school dormitory reported a Mage Orc commanding its lessers to kidnap their female peers.

Where?

Most likely, they were brought inside this cave.

For what?

The scene before us provided a clue.

In a corner of the room lay an unsettling mass of flesh, resembling human organs that squirm and quiver. Tentacle-like appendages sprouted from various parts of the chaotic mass, waving toward the ceiling as if searching for something.

Under sunlight, it must have had a shiny pink hue; however, under night vision goggles, it took on a dusk-like glow, darkened even more by splotches of blood.

That was where the missing students were taken: into that mass of flesh.

No, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that they were actively being consumed.

Some of them were sticking out just their heads and gasping for air. I saw limbs poking out, spasming under the pressure, probably from someone else. And then there were girls with just their chests visible.

From where we stood, I had a feeling there were five or six bodies total.

In front of these sacrificial students, both Mia and I froze, completely rigid.

Mia swallowed audibly before saying, "Oh, tentacle play."

This girl never loses her composure for long.

Her comment instantly dissipated the tension.

"That Shoggoth-like creature is next! Tamaki, Arisu, don't get close to the left-hand corner! Mia, attack the archer on the right with magic!" I said.

"Understood. I will use Lightning."

Mia let off a bolt of lightning that electrified the archer on her right, who was ready to fire his bow. He shook and stumbled away.

Tamaki grabbed a knife and approached the archer before her. Meanwhile, Arisu stepped forward and stabbed at the archer next to her.

The two glanced over at the far corner of the room, where they noticed a mage, but didn't take their eyes off the scene in front of them for long. Though there were many enemies, they were relatively weak when fighting separately.

The pitfall had disabled my Iron Golem earlier, but we could resuscitate it with Fly if needed.

For the time being, though, we didn't have time for casting spells.

Arisu and Tamaki advanced on the ten archers ahead of them, who all quickly threw down their bows and unsheathed their swords as soon as they saw them coming. However, it wasn't enough; Tamaki, even wielding a dagger instead of a sword still outmatched them both. The archers fell one by one until Tamaki leveled up after beating the third one.

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The five of us look at one another in the white room.

Shiki took in my pale face with a tilt of her head, as if asking what was wrong. So, one by one, we filled her in.

"A creature like that exists?" Shiki mumbled in shock, crossing her arms in front of her. After a few moments, she asked, "So, we're calling it a what now? *Shoggoth*?"

Everyone had a little laugh, blowing away the apprehension in the room. I saw Shiki smiling, and I knew they were making a joke on purpose.

"If there's something better," I said, "I'm open to hearing it."

"How about Globster? Short for 'grotesque blob monster.' It's a type of unidentified mysterious animal—a fleshy creature," Mia suggested.

Mia always had a way of making things more interesting, and she kept on talking.

"Wait, isn't that monster from a video game, not a UMA?" She grinned. I couldn't help but chuckle at her.

But she wasn't done yet. "Hmmm, Globster... Wasn't there a theory that it's just the carcass of a whale?"

"You really know your stuff, Mia," I said, impressed by her knowledge.

"UMA are my hobby as an otaku," she replied with a thumbs up.

I smiled; everyone needed a hobby, after all. Mia's humor helped lighten the mood in the room and snapped me out of my own thoughts.

But then again, maybe it was all calculated; Mia was no ordinary girl. She was aware of what was going on around her at all times—a rare talent indeed.

"By the way, globster isn't actually a UMA. It's an unidentified mass of flesh that washed up on the beach..."

Shiki tried to interrupt and redirect our conversation. "We'll hear more about that later," she interjected before continuing, happy to talk.

Maybe Mia wasn't pretending after all.

"Anyway, Kazu, what do you think about calling it a Globster?" she asked me.

"What does the name matter if we don't even know what's happening to these girls?" I responded bluntly.

"This situation is unfortunate for them, but it's not the fundamental issue," Shiki explained rather coldly. "In the worst-case scenario, it might be better to just kill them."

The idea of killing someone made me shudder slightly, but I knew that sometimes extreme measures were necessary.

Arisu and Tamaki let out stifled gasps.

Shiki probably wanted to impress upon them the hard measures they might have to take, and she was willing to be heartless.

I saw why she was doing this. She wanted me to be a symbol of love and an illuminating leader who shined on everyone. On the other hand, Shiki was willing to play the other side we needed: a strict leader who would even behave tyrannically if needed for the greater good.

Well, it's kind of weird to say I'm a symbol of love and shine on others, but I understand it in my head.

The carrot and the stick. Both were the wheels of the organization.

It put Shiki in an unfavorable light, but it is a mutually agreed-upon arrangement. It hurt me to deceive Arisu and Tamaki, but we needed the two of them to understand how bad things could be.

If I could save someone's life, I'd do anything to save it. But if, for example, I encountered a crazed child and Cure Mind couldn't cure them....

The same went for those anyone who'd lost limbs. To repair them with Cure Deficit, we needed the missing parts.

Normally, we wouldn't have the spare capacity to support additional people in the current Cultural Arts Center.

I knew I would eventually need to make a heartless decision, and Shiki was ready to take full responsibility for it. We'd probably need her courage before long.

"So, what's going on with these girls?"

"Yes, Kazu-kun, what do you think?"

"Honestly, I think Mia knows more about that kind of thing..."

Mia paused dramatically before continuing, looking around in confusion. "What kind of erotic story are you all hoping for?" She put a finger to her lips

and pondered aloud. "Let's not make the situation more tense than necessary. In terms of offerings, we have mana, evil gods, and monsters," she concluded.

"Monsters, like bees?" I asked.

"A woman with monster embryos inside her... undesired childbirth... and perpetual humiliation... *gulp*." She proved to be remarkably composed despite this description.

We had spoken about it earlier, but what if the sudden appearance of all the bees this morning really was related? Yet there were no Giant Wasps in the midst of battle. If it was indeed a spawning ground, then wasn't it strange that there were no signs of its existence? While it could be merely a coincidence, I couldn't help but be suspicious.

"It looks like the globs are transmitting mana via some kind of warp gate," Shiki said.

"That's likely the answer," I said, glancing at her. Even in this hideous state of affairs, one theory we had was that they were conducting rituals of some sort. The stone monument I stumbled on last night seemed to add to that theory. Just what were orcs doing inside this cave?

"I don't want to believe they're summoning evil gods."

"Will we be able to beat a demonic god anyway?"

"Would it help if I reached Rank 9 in Spear and Sword Arts?" Tamaki asked. She'd need to level up five times and focus on just Sword Arts each time to reach Rank 9. If archers or giant wasps attacked now, she might be able to level up enough times, but she couldn't hope for that to happen.

"Let's move ahead based on what we know for now. I'll leave right away as well," Shiki said.

"Shiki-san, you don't have to come over until the fight is finished."

"All right. I intend to quickly gather Experience Points, so you won't need to worry later."

That was a relief. If we lost Shiki, we'd lose the leader for our Cultural Arts Center group, and we'd fall apart in no time. I didn't think that I could manage

thirty girls on my own.

If I could help Shiki level up even a little bit, it would be a huge benefit for the entire organization.

After talking further about this plan, we returned to our original position.

TAMAKI	
LEVEL: 18	SWORDSMANSHIP: 7
STRENGTH: 1	SKILL POINTS: 7

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Going right back into the fight, my Wind Elemental fought by itself with its dominant hand, but four archers loosed arrows simultaneously, all of them piercing the elemental. It fell down, vanishing. However, it managed to take one of the archers with it before disappearing.

Arisu’s experience increased due to this, so she put her acquired skill points into spear techniques.

Arisu’s proficiency in the use of a spear had reached Rank 6.

ARISU	
LEVEL: 18	SPEARMANSHIP: 5 → 6
HEALING MAGIC: 5	SKILL POINTS: 6 → 0

After a brief discussion, we exited the white room. Mia responded quickly and cast her Lightning spell, taking out another one of the two remaining foes on our right. The archer lined up a shot at us, but Mia created a raging tornado that blocked the line of fire. Meanwhile, Arisu and Tamaki engaged the

swordsman in a fight, overpowering their enemy together. Then, from the darkness emerged a mage holding their wand at Arisu's spear.

Uh-oh, that's trouble. "Arisu!" I called out in warning.

"I'm okay," she replied with confidence. "I can handle this!"

Arisu clung to her spear, her knuckles pale and lips pressed together. With sheer force of will, she had managed to grip the red-hot shaft still burning from Heat Metal.

"Dispel!"

Arisu recited her spell and pointed it at the handle of the weapon, casting Rank 3 Healing Magic that neutralized any existing magical effect. It worked, and the heat on the metal was gone.

The mage appeared stunned, unable to comprehend why their spell failed. That had been Shiki's plan: not only did canceling Heat Metal help Arisu, but also prevented the enemy from using the same magic again.

Mia nodded in understanding. "Psychological manipulation of your opponents—that's what Shiki says."

I cursed at these damn gamers.

"What an unexpected compliment." Shiki and Mia both beamed with pride.

I still couldn't wrap my head around what was going on. As expected, the Mage Orc shifted its intention and cast a Rank 1 spell that fired pebbles. Arisu seized the opportunity to throw her javelin toward it. The spearhead made contact even better than she had envisioned and punctured its chest from which spilled blood freely until it keeled over. We found ourselves returning to the white space once more, only now Shiki had increased a level.

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"I've got four skill points now, so I'll increase my reconnaissance ability." Shiki prioritized survivability, and we all supported that.

"Arisu, once we get back, join us and take out the archer on the right," Tamaki said.

"Mm-hmm, I will."

Our two vanguards had cleared the front lines. It was unlikely they'd have trouble dispatching the remaining four targets.

The two archers on the right had tried to target us through a tornado, so I asked Arisu to prepare a countermeasure.

Meanwhile, five archers and two Wind Elementals were in a stalemate on our left flank—but that was fine.

Shiki operated the PC. "Well then, let's leave the white room."

YUKARIKO SHIKI	
LEVEL: 8	RECONNAISSANCE: 4
THROWING: 3	SKILL POINTS: 4 → 0

The battle was heading toward its conclusion.

Chapter 74: The Power of the Globbs

There were eleven enemy archers in the cave's deepest chamber, but we could handle that. However, I was more worried about the Globster in the back-left corner. It had been pulsating with unearthly sounds, but would it really leave us alone until our fight was over?

I kept my eye on the Globster while Mia and I inched closer to the center of the hall. Two archers on the right loosed arrows at us, but Mia created a protective wall with Whirlwind. Meanwhile, Arisu advanced towards the enemies on the right flank, dodging arrows as she went.

On the left side, the five archers who were battling the two Wind Elementals there were moving in our direction slowly, heading for the Globster's location.

"Mia, can you focus your lightning blasts to the left?"

"Sure thing. You want me to keep them from going towards the back?"

"Exactly."

Mia shot several bolts at the archers on the left to stop them in their tracks. By positioning ourselves in the middle of the room, we were able to block their advance.

However, this seemed to be a catalyst for our enemies to switch plans. All five of the archers on the left ran straight to the rear along with the four Tamaki was battling.

"Hey! Come back here!" Tamaki shouted as she gave chase. She attacked one of the archers from behind with her dagger, bringing him down. The blade was shorter than her usual weapon, but it was all she had available. Even though our opponents had no bows—and thus less firepower—it took longer than expected for us to prevail over them.

One of the archers stepped into Tamaki's path, blocking her way.

"Outta my way!" she screamed as she swung her dagger. In a single swift motion, she severed his neck.



As the blue blood splattered toward me, I envisioned my opponent's body as a flagpole and spun around to escape it. The remaining two had already started running away from us by then. Mia's lightning defeated one on my left, while a Wind Elemental took care of the other. Tamaki had chased off after two others; both ran away from her in opposite directions, while the remaining pair sprinted toward the Globster. There were only four archers left alive, and we knew we needed to deal with them quickly.

Suddenly, the Globster's entire body trembled violently and began to emit a pale-blue light. A white ringlike symbol appeared on the ground with a radius of about ten meters, centered on the fleshy mass.

Mia was frantic. "Oh no! Kazu, that looks like a magic circle!"

"I know what it is! Tamaki!" I lunged toward her. "Tamaki, stop chasing them down!"

"What? What's happening right now?" she asked, confused.

Tamaki was preoccupied with eliminating the archers and had destroyed one more. All of a sudden, her foot stepped onto the white ring on the ground.

"No!"

"What?"

Tamaki looked at her feet as she finally realized something was wrong. Mia and I already understood what was happening. I sprinted to her side and grabbed her hand.

"Tamaki!"

"Huh? Kazu-san?"

We didn't have any time left, so I grabbed Tamaki's body and tugged her away from the circle.

"Aaaaah!"

The force toppled Tamaki outside of the white ring but sent me forward, taking her place.

The light from the circle grew brighter by the second.

I'm finished for sure, I thought. I stared at Shiki as she appeared nearby.

"Meet me in two hours!" I shouted.

Surrounded by a brilliant white light, I fell to the ground and shouted the same thing again. Shiki looked at me in surprise for a few moments before comprehension dawned on her face. She nodded firmly.

Tamaki was doing her best to act tough as she watched everything from outside the ring of light.

The light was getting too strong; it was all I could see at this point. I felt woozy, like a huge vortex was spinning around me, making me nauseated. I pressed my hand to my mouth and held back the urge to vomit.

And then I slipped away into unconsciousness.

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I heard a woman singing, firm yet melodic. Although I didn't understand the language, from her tone, I could tell this was a sad love song. Her voice was so powerful that it overwhelmed me. I felt as though I might cry. Guided by that voice, I opened my mouth and screamed something.

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My legs felt like jelly, and I could make out an archer's muffled groans. We were outnumbered by the enemy. I had to get up.

I peeled open my eyelids, but the light immediately blinded me. I gasped and rolled onto the ground in shock. Thankfully, the enemy didn't strike.

Where was everyone?

Then I remembered what happened—an Archer Orc and three others were still alive, and so were my Wind Elementals, who'd been tossed away with us. Instinctively, I commanded them to guard me, and soon enough a powerful gust of wind enveloped me. As I opened my eyes again, I couldn't help but marvel at the vast blue sky above us. It all dawned on me.

"We were thrown out into the wilderness, surrounded by lush green grass and a bright blue sky... Oh." I gasped, looking at the Wind Elementals right beside me. They stared at me expectantly, as if they were awaiting instructions, but I was lost for words.

Standing up and glancing around, I noticed we were positioned atop a hill. Three Archer Orcs sprinted down the steep incline, fleeing in desperation. There were no other adversaries close by, so it seemed our course of action was to take them out. Heeding my command, two Wind Elementals darted off after the Archers. In spite of the distance between them, the flying spirits managed to catch up quickly.

The Archers had no chance against them. We defeated two of them and leveled up.

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I was standing in a white room all by myself. Just a few moments ago, I was with four other people, but now I was the only one.

I took in a deep breath and sighed heavily. Of course I ended up here. After switching spots with Tamaki, I had been sucked into Globster's warp device, sending me to an unknown place. That grotesque flesh lump was definitely worse than I expected. It made me wonder if it would have been better if we'd all warped together; at least then I wouldn't be alone and feeling so lonely right now—not that I could do anything about that.

"Well, this sucks..." I mumbled quietly to myself. The walls of the white room replied merely with silence.

I wanted to cry.

I shook my head in a panic, trying to chase away my cowardice.

Two hours. That's right. I made a promise with Shiki.

She should've understood what I meant.

Two hours later, I'd use Summon Circle, Rank 6 Summoning Magic.

The starting point of Summon Circle was drawn in the Cultural Arts Center. Anything placed or anyone standing on it would automatically be teleported to me the moment I used this magic.

Will Shiki-san do exactly as I wish? Or... will she abandon me?

Abandoned.

The moment I think that, I felt a strong pain in my chest. My heart was beating faster and harder.

Oh no, I thought I'd gotten over this... I bit my lips tightly, shaking my head violently.

I breathed in and out deeply, trying to regain my composure before I fell into panic. I reminded myself that Shiki wouldn't betray me. Besides, Arisu and Tamaki wouldn't let that happen. I supposed Mia would side with them too. There was no way Shiki could possibly manipulate all three of these powerful forces... or could she? I couldn't help but think he had the aptitude for it.

No, it's okay. She should be trustworthy. Like a mantra, I repeated those words in my head.

"Ha ha... what am I saying? I haven't made any progress at all. In the end, I..."

Suddenly, Mia's voice broke through my thoughts. "Hmm. You know, if you want to cry, that's okay."

I whirled around to see a petite girl standing right behind me making a peace sign.

"Yay!"



"What? Why is Mia...?"

She followed me...?

Come to think of it, when I looked back before teleporting, I couldn't see Mia.

I was in a rush at that time and hadn't thought about it, but... could she have come running right behind me?

Come to think of it, Mia is surprisingly fast on her feet.

"I was worried about you being alone," she said.

"Um... thank you for that."

"But then I witnessed your weak side." She smirked mischievously.

I didn't even need to feel the hotness of my cheeks to know that my face was bright red as I remembered the past few moments.

Mia smiled reassuringly. "Everyone makes mistakes—it's all right. Don't worry too much about it."

I scratched the back of my head and emitted an awkward noise as I craned my neck up toward the ceiling. Embarrassment had taken its toll on me, and I flailed around on the floor of the white room.

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Once I got my bearings, I confirmed the current circumstances with Mia again.

"In any case... we need to figure out why the orcs had chosen this warp point."

Where were they going? What were they planning? We needed to find out as soon as possible.

I had wanted to send a crow with the ability of remote viewing originally, but things had changed. That didn't mean we shouldn't still try to disrupt the orcs' plan, though.

Except we still had no idea how to get back...

"Shiki-chan will send Arisu-chan and Tamaki-chan in two hours," I said.

"Haste makes waste," Mia added wisely. I nodded in agreement.

I closed my eyes and recalled the scenery around us. The grassland we appeared on was a hilly terrain. From that hill, there was a town visible. I saw it only briefly, but it resembled a typical fortress city in a fantasy world—somewhere people lived, probably the indigenous people of this world. If we could meet them and get help, that was worth some risk. And then, how much information could we obtain? My actions over the next few hours will have to determine that.

I took some deep breaths to calm myself down.

"Kazu, it's okay. There's no problem," Mia said. "What's wrong? I'll comfort you physically," Mia says.

"I don't need that right now."

I had six skill points, but I'd save them. If I was going to act alone with Mia, the next thing I'd raise would be Summoning Magic.

"Well then, shall we go?"

"Mm."

I pressed the Return key, and we were transported to our original location.

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 21	SUPPORT MAGIC: 5
SUMMONING MAGIC: 8	SKILL POINTS: 6

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Mia and I left the white room to witness the Wind Elementals fighting the Archer. Once he was dealt with, we went back down the hill to collect all the dropped gems. I realized I should have kept a few of them for myself after realizing I had seven blue and twenty red gems, while Mia had three blue and

thirty red gems. As I looked out at the town in the distance, something caught my attention.

"Hey Mia," I said, "look at that town over there."

"Hmm? Let me put on my glasses," she replied, before taking out her shabby black-framed glasses from her backpack. It turned out Mia was nearsighted, but she could manage without them most of the time. After putting them on, she stared in the direction of the town.



We both gasped.

"Black smoke... It's not from cooking, is it?" Mia said.

"No, and it looks like it's on the left side."

"Even with my glasses, I can't make out what it is..."

We knew immediately that something was amiss in the town.

"Monsters?"

"I'm not sure. I've never seen something like this before..."

The creature near the city had tanned skin and a bald head. It was hurling large rocks at the wall—not unlike an orc, but much larger than anything we'd seen before.

"It's huge," Mia said with awe. The beast must have been nearly four meters tall! Even the rock in its hands was more of a boulder than a pebble.

"Is that a Titan?"

"That's what it looks like," Mia whispers while muttering something about an attack on a titan. I shook my head, not wanting to make any jokes at this point.

"There are more monsters besides the Titan," I comment.

Mia squinted her eyes, trying to get a better glimpse of them. "I can't really see them from here."

We exchanged glances before I replied, "Monsters are definitely attacking that town."

"If the giant monster is attacking the city walls, then who knows what's happened inside..." I let out a sigh as realization hits me—we've stumbled across a monster siege on the fortress city.

Now, what should we do? Whoever was defending the wall might potentially become our allies if we fought off the monsters.

But with my MP drained and only Mia accompanying me...

Chapter 75: The Outside World

We were perched on top of a hill, the sun setting in the background. To the north lay a fortified city, five kilometers away. Mia took out a pair of binoculars from her backpack and handed them to me.

"How much stuff did you cram into your backpack?" I took the pair of lenses and zoomed on the town.

Shielded by a mountain to the east, it seemed an army of monsters was attacking from the west—the chief culprit was a Titan, four meters tall, followed by five others. There also appeared to be over a hundred other monsters, most likely goblins and their ilk. How strong were the soldiers defending the walls? Were they good enough to win against such odds?

I handed the binoculars back to Mia. She looked through them, then gave me a curious glance. I studied her expression and searched for clues as to what she was thinking. As usual, her face remained unreadable, but then her eyebrow twitched, and I knew.

"Do you think we should go help?" I asked.

"Mm," she replied.

"We don't know if those people in the village are friends or foes."

"But sometimes your enemy's enemy can be your friend," she countered.

Her statement made sense; it was something I had been telling myself all day. The high schoolers were enemies of our enemies, yet they still stood against the orcs on their own. Even so, I had dismissed Shiba from my mind.

The enemy of my enemy is not always my friend, but I shouldn't discount the possibility they could be.

I started to question if Mia was right, but I'm still so happy she was here with me.

She grabbed my hand and sat down on the grass before I sat beside her. I let myself melt into the ground, feeling content.

"We need a break," Mia said.

"Yeah... you're right."

We were worn out from fighting in the unknown cave. We were tense, and my MP was almost gone. Though Mia still likely had more than half left, it was better for us to take a break and prepare for battle with the many enemies ahead of us. If either Arisu or Tamaki were present, we would have made a different decision... However, since it's just us two magic users, there was no use running into the fray with no MP left, as we'd only be setting ourselves up for disaster.

We commanded the two airborne entities to remain inactive. We then disabled our connection with the iron golem we had left on the other side. MP replenishment through assignation was impossible since it required the presence of a subject. It was a shame, but there was no way around losing all 36 MP.

Mia leaned against me as I sat there with my legs crossed, and we exchanged glances, squinting in the blinding sun's radiance.

"I'm tired," she said.

"Would you like to rest for a few minutes?"

"No, I shouldn't do that. It would be a waste."

"Why a waste?"

"Because I've got some quality time with you."

Yes, indeed. We had just been in a white room without anyone else around us. If we wanted to continue fighting those beasts, we'd have to go back to that same place soon enough.

"Should we start discussing our strategy for the next battle?"

"Kazu, this isn't the kind of thing you bring up around a girl," Mia said.

"Oddly enough, I don't believe my chivalrous duties include escorting you around," I joked.

Mia laughed. "Fair point."

"We need to get some information first, don't you think?"

"Right," she agreed. "Even if it's not good news for the people living in that village, we still have to know what's going on. We may not be able to talk to these people from another world, but at least we should figure out how the monsters are related to them and whether they're dangerous or not."

"Yeah. Even for the future," I added, "we have to know if we can accept the standard humans of this world and anything similar to them."

Mia was about to say something else but held her tongue.

I knew what she was thinking, even though she didn't voice it. The possibility of having to stay here permanently or for an extended period of time was something we had to consider.

Mia sighed.

I wasn't sure what she was going through.

Arisu, Tamaki, and I were all in similar positions—I had been disowned by my parents and adopted as a foster child, while they had strained relationships with theirs.

But Mia's story was different; she still had a real family and seemed to care deeply for her older brother. She must have been desperate to get back home. As for Arisu, Tamaki, and me... sure, we wanted to go back to Japan, but there was no one waiting for us once we got there. My parents had thrown me into the school and become unreachable. It sounded like Arisu's and Tamaki's families were the same way. We were all alone.

We wanted to leave this dangerous world where orcs were rampant. We wanted to return to a place with basic amenities like running electricity and food, but that didn't mean we wanted to seriously risk our lives. I'd taken a life before; I killed Shiba with my own hands—even though he was attacking me, I

wasn't sure how people back home would think of me once everything was revealed. Nonetheless, living in this world wasn't particularly desirable either.

There was no point in dwelling on it, though.

"Hey, Kazu." Mia reached out and touched my cheek. Her hand felt cool, yet somehow it put me at ease. With her, I always felt calm and peaceful due to her down-to-earth attitude and gentle aura.

"You're what's known as a 'healing type,' right?"

The petite girl tilted her head. "I may be considered moe," she muttered almost under her breath.

"As if," I said with a shrug.

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In about half an hour, it was time to survey the area. I did my usual remote viewing technique, then commanded a crow to fly toward the fortress city, reaching its destination on a gust of wind. It circled up close where I could see the Titan with sunburnt skin trying to tear down the walls by hurling massive rocks at them. The cracks all around the wall illustrated its imminent destruction.

Around the Titan were roughly two hundred soldiers with leather armor and helmets that hid their faces, armed with sharp swords and shields but also some bows and arrows. There were also other creatures like gray wolves—different from the Hellhounds—and figures wearing black robes. Again, facing the wall, I checked for any sign of other people. I found a group of burly men desperately manning ballistae.

The commander barked orders, and the men loaded their ballistae with arrows. But before they had time to shoot them, the figures in black robes let out a volley of flaming arrows that decimated the missiles. They had each used the spell Flame Arrows, meaning, they each had be at least a Rank 3 fire magician to cast it. It looked like there were more than five magic-wielding enemies. They might cause more trouble than dealing with the Titan would. They threw Fire Bombs, Rank 3 Fire Magic, and the explosions engulfed the

ballistae and those nearby. The wretched screams of those burning alive were lost in remote viewing. This was a surreal scene, straight out of a Hollywood movie. The few who managed to get away from the inferno ran for safety...

The stone the Titan had thrown shook the town walls. The impact made part of the wooden boards at the top come apart, and the guards lost their footing, tumbling into the dark below. Fortunately, even with a portion of it broken away, the wall was not so tall that humans couldn't climb over it... but that also meant the Titan could. This worrisome thought lingered in my mind as the crow surveyed the inside of the wall.

I observed rows of brick houses, soldiers scurrying down brick-paved roads, and a two-story mansion surrounded by walls in the center of town. From what I could tell, this fortress city was much smaller than anticipated—no more than five hundred meters across!

And then I noticed people in the garden. Men and women—were they civilians?

I don't really understand, but they're not hiding. They're... working?

Well, I guess that makes sense. They're caught in a brutal war. If they lose here, it's a one-way ticket to complete defeat, so they wanted to do what they could to help.

The crow circled and returned to its course. Aw, I wanted to observe more.

After cutting the link with the crow, I conveyed the scene to Mia, but she just shook her head several times, seeming confused and bewildered.

"What's wrong, Mia?"

"Kazucchi..."

Mia looked up at me with a gaze that implied she wanted something, but she was extremely hesitant. I had no clue what she was getting at.

"Mia, you can tell me anything. Your opinion matters to me."

"But..."

"Or... do you not trust me?"

Even I think this is a mean thing to say. Firstly, I don't even trust myself.

But it might be useful to get Mia to speak up.

Mia nodded slightly. After opening and closing her mouth two or three times, she made up her mind and nodded more strongly.

"Kazucchi, actually, I... I've always longed to be a hero."

Chapter 76: Mia's Wish

Mia flashed a wry smile. "I've been watching my big brother from the sidelines since I was little. He's a perfect example of what an incredible person looks like, so it's easy to feel inferior in comparison."

Having met Yuuki-senpai, I sympathized. I didn't have any older siblings, but I could imagine how she felt being in his shadow.

"My brother was too brilliant for his own good," Mia continued. "No matter what he tried, he excelled effortlessly and people around him took notice. I don't think I can ever measure up to him."

"That must be hard," I said. She must have understood that comparing herself to him wouldn't help anyone, but I stayed silent, aware she knew that better than anyone else.

Was it really a misfortune to grow up beside someone who was excessively talented? That wasn't for me to say, being an average Joe myself. What I did recognize, though, was that Mia had opened up to me and shared her genuine emotions with someone for the first time.

"There really is something special about one's imagination as a young teenager."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Delusions can be a sort of lifeline for a failing heart." Mia gazed up at the sky, and I did the same. The blue expanse above me was so clear that it seemed to draw me in.

Mia continued. "I believed if I could fly like a bird, I'd be better than my brother. That delusion gave me strength when I was on the brink of being overwhelmed by my inferiority complex—back at home and even here at school."

"If you said you didn't want to attend the same school as your brother..."

She shook her head. "I don't hate my brother. In fact, I'm obsessed with him. He's my ideal type!"

"Ah. Not surprising," I muttered to myself.

Suddenly she punched me and glared.

"Why'd you hit me?!"

"I hate when people talk about me behind my back," she said sternly.

"But that was totally unreasonable!" I protested.

"Unreasonable violence is part of what makes moe characters so cute!" Mia grinned. "If only I had *something* I was better at than my brother—then I'd be saved," she continued.

"So... you want to be a hero?" I asked.

"My brother doesn't care about impressing people," Mia cautiously said. In the end, she really was infatuated with Yuuki and obsessed with following him.

The two made an unusual pair. Mia said that while Yuuki could recognize what people felt, he didn't understand them. He and ordinary mortals were irreconcilably different species.

I sympathized. Perhaps Yuuki was so extraordinary that even if others tried to read his emotions, they wouldn't possess the knowledge to truly understand him.

To me, he resembled a monster more than an orc. His luminous eyes beneath the ninja costume appeared otherworldly.

And then there was Mia, who must have been his closest confidante of sorts.

"So, what about you?" I asked her softly.

"All I want is something I can show my brother proudly—something he doesn't possess himself," Mia answered. "I want him to rely on me for support."

"Even if Yuuki-senpai doesn't want something like that?"

Mia lowered her head and shook it slowly from side to side in response. Then she looked up at me seriously. "Danger is a natural consequence of adventuring

with ideals of heroism. Feel free to say no if you don't want to take part. I'd understand."

"Don't worry about my opinion. Tell me, Mia, what do *you* want now?"

"But..."

"If I deem it too risky, I'll say so," I clarified for Mia.

At my words, she closed her eyes and smiled softly.

"You're kind," she whispered, meeting my gaze when she opened her eyes again. "Will the town fall?"

"Most likely, if left unchecked."

"Are there many people living there?"

"I'm not sure how to define 'many,' but I saw a decent amount of people fortifying their homes."

"Ah..." Mia glanced away thoughtfully. "I want to help as many people as I can, even if we can't beat all the monsters or save everyone... Is that too much to ask?"

"That's quite modest of you." I smiled. "Wouldn't you rather say something like 'We'll defeat all our enemies and protect the town'?"

Mia shook her head. "Maybe if our circumstances were different, but in this case... It's hard."

Mia wasn't all that different from her brother. Despite saying she wanted to be a hero, her thoughts were really just cold, calculated maneuvers. I found that quite dependable, though.

"Anyway, I think saving who we can but acting carefully is a reasonable plan," she concluded.

"If we do try to compromise with the locals, couldn't we bother negotiating with them?"

"It's foolish to negotiate in a life-or-death situation."

That was a valid point. As she said, this was probably the most reasonable tactic. The only problem was that the local inhabitants would likely be

massacred.

"Let's at least capture one of the locals and see if we can communicate with them."

"Agreed. This world is full of mysteries, like monsters that can turn into jewels and skill systems. If we can communicate, hopefully we'll get some questions answered."

The other issue was where exactly we were in this world. If we could at least determine a general location, Mia could work on reaching Rank 9 Wind Magic to use the Shape Lightning spell, which would allow her to move at near-light speed. However, that effect was restricted to the caster.

If we searched the world multiple times, dozens of times, or hundreds of times, we might've been able to discover the school's mountain. At the very least, she alone could return to the mountain. This was a method assuming the size of this world was the same as Earth's, but in reality, it wasn't thousands of times bigger than Earth or anything like that. Because anything was possible in fantasy, it couldn't be said for certain, but the laws of physics seemed normal, and when you looked at something far away, you could tell where the horizon was, right?

Oh, I've never really understood physics.

To start with, it'd be difficult to raise her Wind Magic to Rank 9. Even if we annihilated the army in front of us, it'd be impossible. And if the enemy got reinforcements... we could be the ones who ended up being wiped out.

In the end, the best thing to do was to wait for Shiki and the others to come help us after the two hours. The monsters might have completely destroyed the town by then, but we could defeat the scattered enemies one by one.

However, in that case, Mia wouldn't become the hero she wanted to be...

It was impossible to prioritize our safety and Mia's desires wholly.

In that case, the key question was at what point we could intervene and still be safe.

"If we use Fly, can we fly at the same speed as the crow from earlier? Mia, how long did it take for the crow to reach the fortress?"

"I didn't measure it precisely, but I think it took more than five minutes, probably less than ten."

Since Fly lasted two to three minutes per rank, with Mia's then current rank, it would last ten to fifteen minutes. If she was too slow, there was a possibility that the magic would run out midway.

Even if that were to happen, she'd slowly fall to the ground, so we could recast it... *Just in case, should we recast it around eight minutes?*

"It'd be better to approach as soon as we can right now..."

"I disagree. The enemy could discover us too easily that way. When the wall is broken and the monsters and people in the town are desperately fighting, that'll be the chance for us to approach," I cautioned.

We knew that our battle strategy was becoming riskier, but with only two of us, we didn't have any other options. We had to take advantage of the situation as much as we could. Unfortunately, our options for battle were limited since the vanguard was only a familiar.

"If we rush off now, the whole enemy army might take control of the town by the time we get there," I said.

"That would make it simpler to fight them in smaller batches."

Many people were going to die in the process, and not everyone could be rescued, but that was better than being completely annihilated. We had no idea what moves the foes would make if they were given a chance.

We didn't even know whether the other people living here were our allies. We needed somebody to go and look around—one individual who would remain safe no matter what happened. I was sure Mia had managed her hero complex, but maybe she was balancing savage inclinations without me noticing. Even though I doubted she'd tell me directly, I suspected as much. Mia was courageous and mature beyond her middle school years. She'd impressed me ever since I met her, anyway.

"Kazucchi," she started unexpectedly, "just so you know, I really want my brother to recognize what I can do."

"Oh, really?" I questioned, startled that she could comprehend my inner musings.

Mia gently placed her hand on top of mine before continuing. "Your safety is important to me. I regret what happened last night because it put you in harm's way."

She was referring to the commotion caused by Arisu acting on her own while Tamaki connected all the dots together. Our group's success was due to everyone trusting one another, but something else triggered their victory as well: sheer luck.

Mia looked right into my eyes, her lips slowly forming words. "Kazucchi, remember this one thing."

Interrupting the scene was a faraway loud noise, echoing through the area. We both turned our heads toward the fortress city and saw a part of the wall collapse in a heartbreaking state.

Mia smiled. "At least we didn't trigger a death flag!" She was already jumping to her feet.

"Hey, wait up!"

"Let's go, Kazu!"

"Uh, sure."

Mia reached out her hand, and I took it as I stood up.

This girl, I thought.

Mia used her Fly spell on both of us.

We soared through the sky, followed by two of my Wind Elementals.

Looking at my watch, I saw we'd been there for about forty-five minutes.

My MP was far from full, but it had recovered to about 95.

No, I had used magic during my reconnaissance, so it was probably more like 90. With this MP, I had no choice but to do what I could.

We aimed to fly as low as possible, without being detected by the enemy, and headed towards the town.

*Another World Survival: Min-maxing my Support and Summoning Magic
will continue in Volume 4*

Side Story: Yukariko Shiki Doesn't Need a Balance

I don't need to balance myself anymore. I had already decided what I needed to cut off from the start, I thought to myself.

As Yukariko Shiki, living was my redemption. I'd survive, even if it meant crawling through the mud. I had to protect the middle school students who looked up to me and Kazu-kun as their leader, as their comrade. I had to protect them as their senior, their mentor. I had to organize and rally them to eliminate the threat of monsters as a whole group of Cultural Arts Center members. That was what was within my power right then. I had to do everything that needed to be done, or else I wouldn't be able to face myself. That's what I had sworn to do, and for the past three days, I had fought with all my might.

I didn't know how this battle would end, but when it was all over, would she forgive me? The girl who had been killed before my eyes by the orcs... Would she forgive me?

"What should we do?" Tamaki asked, downhearted. Kazu and Mia had disappeared on the magic circle in the deepest part of the damp cave, the Globster's chamber.

It was Tamaki's careless actions that had led to this situation. That was a fact.

Arisu was trying to comfort her, but I didn't know what to say. Arisu had defeated the Globster and sent it away in a shower of yellow gemstones. We hadn't earned any experience points from that battle; that strange monster felt different than any other creature we'd faced.

The girls who had been taken by the Globster were lying before us, covered in slime. They were terribly pale. They weren't responding to Arisu's healing magic or Cure Mind. Their hearts were still beating, but they seemed beyond saving.

I looked up at the ceiling, my heart heavy. I had come to a decision.

Tamaki lay on the ground, sobbing. "It's all my fault, I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

I hesitated, knife in hand. After a moment, I mustered my resolve and cut off the heads of the motionless girls. Their blood sprinkled me like a shower, staining my tracksuit and cheeks. Even as my knife dug in, the girls were completely still.

Arisu stared at me in shock while Tamaki raised her head and gaped in horror at what I'd done.

After killing them all, I straightened up and turned to Arisu and Tamaki. "This is the best thing for them. They don't have to suffer like we do here at the Cultural Arts Center any longer."

"But..." Arisu said in confusion.

I shook my head slowly.

"There's no way we could have taken care of these girls. We don't have the resources or capabilities; we're barely able to make ends meet." So, I concluded, "I will be the one who decides which girls get to stay and which must go."

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Tamaki stopped crying and stood up in shock. I tried to put on a brave face and smiled at her.

"Don't worry," I said reassuringly. "Kazu and Mia have us covered. We only have two hours before the circle set up in the Cultural Arts Center activates. Tamaki and Arisu, we're going to help Kazu."

"Ah... really? Two hours later?" Tamaki questioned with a smile on her face.

"Yes, that's what Kazu said," I replied as I ran my fingers through her blonde hair.

"Then let's go back there right away," she said energetically.

I shook my head. "Not yet," I answered gently. "We still have time. Let's check out the other side of this cave first."

Arisu was staring at the corpse of the Globster victim that I killed, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Maybe we'll find another student alive this time," I added, trying to give her some hope. "Let's help each other out and carry these kids away," I said, worried about our combat power as it was.



The three extra members, including Sakura, had been waiting by the entrance to the cave when we returned. Sakura gasped as she caught sight of the dead body we were carrying.

"What will happen to them...?"

"Would it be possible for us to give them a proper burial?"

We entrusted this task to Yuri and Shione, who dug a grave with great solemnity. I remarked that they had become quite adept at digging holes thanks to Kazu's guidance, and gave a small smile.

"Sakura-chan, would you like to join us on this mission?"

"Yes, but are Yuri-senpai and Shione-chan the only ones guarding here?"

"I don't think there will be any more orcs coming out from the cave... If it gets dangerous, run back inside and meet up with us."

And so we rearranged our party with Sakura added in, and then we headed toward the crossroads on the opposite side.

We expertly defeated any orcs which attacked us along the way. Sakura leveled up after her third battle, and then we all warped into a white room. There were many things that needed tending to here.

"Let's check out this yellow gem first."

After doing some research on the notebook PC, we found out that it was worth a hundred times more than the red one.

"Globster-san, you're loaded..." Arisu said, and everyone else laughed at her mischievous words. Even Sakura's expressionless face had softened slightly. She looked even a little bit happy.

Seeing this moment made me think that sometimes being naive was its own kind of strength. I wondered how different things would be if Kazu was still like that. I quickly shook my head to brush off that thought. He knew very well why I was using him yet he continued to do his best and fight for us—even when all hope seemed lost. His caution kept us alive both two days earlier and also last night. It amazed me how he managed to become stronger each time danger approached him. People showed their worth in difficult times, so how could you

express the courage of someone who grew fiercer when cornered? Maybe Mia would describe it with words like "heroic" or "valiant," or maybe she'd compare him to characters from manga or anime.

No, that wasn't the answer.

I stared at my hands in disappointment. I felt so weak. I needed to be tougher.

"Shiki-san, it's your turn to rest," Sakura said, turning to me. "I'll kill them."

That surprised me. "What do you mean?"

"If there's anyone we can't bring safely over to the Cultural Arts Center, then I'm ready to eliminate them," Sakura explained.

I realized what a mistake I had made—my feelings were so easy for her to read.

"No. This is something I have to do; it's my job to decide who will live at the Cultural Arts Center from now on," I insisted.

Sakura wasn't dropping it. "Arisu-senpai or Tamaki-senpai shouldn't have to do it—but I can."

I shook my head; although I appreciated her offer, this was something only I could do. Still, Sakura kept on.

"We won't let you break down—we all need you," she said intently, staring straight into my eyes.

I looked away from her, hoping to find a way out of the stifling cave. The further we traveled, the more oppressive the humidity became, and the acrid smell of rot grew more intense.

"I'm gonna need a shower after this," she said as she disposed of yet another giant wasp.

"Do you think maybe there's a bee hive down here?" I asked hesitantly.

Arisu let out a small chuckle. "Let's hope not. I don't want to get into a fight with a queen bee." It might have been a joke, but it didn't seem very funny.

In reality, it would've been better if we'd had more people for this mission. Yuriko and Shione could help too, right? But bringing them would only increase the risk. We had a good lineup: Tamaki at the front with her silver sword, Arisu behind her ready to throw her javelin, and Sakura on support with her fire magic that wouldn't accidentally hit us in close quarters like this. This wasn't a game; friendly fire could happen. With their skills combined, it'd be easy mode.

Sakura was bored with nothing to do, but I was even more bored. That was okay. The two of us are just backup and support personnel after all.

And we arrived at the deepest part on this side of the cave. There was no queen bee that was feared to be here. Instead, there were girls who had been brought here. They were other survivors from our high school and middle school. They were all lying naked on straw, their bellies swollen like balloons.

Most of them were looking up at the ceiling with vacant eyes.

"Wh-what is this...?" Arisu uttered in a stifled voice.

One girl's stomach wriggled, and a bee the size of a fetus covered in slime emerged from between the girl's legs. The girl screamed, and the bee, recognizing us as enemies, spread its wings and attacked.

Tamaki stepped forward and promptly cut it down.

"I've leveled up."

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Arisu screamed in shock and terror inside the white room, "What is this?! What kind of place is this? What's going on here?!"

It was too much for her. That wasn't surprising—I had an inkling that something like this would happen. Sakura kept her expression the same, so I couldn't tell what she was thinking.

Tamaki took Arisu into her arms and consoled her as she crumpled to the floor. It was a complete flip from their previous dynamic. Their strong bond and understanding of each other was evident in situations like this; when one was about to break down, the other instinctively knew how to help.

These two were fortunate enough to both admire Kazu. The strength between them would undoubtedly be beneficial to him in any way possible.

"It's insane to raise bees in someone's womb," Sakura murmured.

I agreed with her, but common sense didn't apply in this world.

Obviously, the bee was no ordinary one, but a monster. Who knew how they were born in this world; perhaps it required certain rituals or the use of magic using human women's wombs. That would explain why the Orc Mage had kidnapped so many girls and locked them in this cave. Three days later, a new being emerged from their bellies—the bees.

I turned to Arisu once she calmed down. We needed to make sure there were no further victims. "Arisu-chan, as soon as we get out of here, I need you to start working."

"On what...?"

"I'm going to cut open the girls' bellies and kill the bees inside. You will heal them immediately. Is that clear?"

"Cut open their bellies...?"

She was tongue-tied, so I resolutely said, "It's important. In order to save them and keep the adversary from becoming any stronger, we have to do this. We've got to help these girls."

Arisu nodded while tears rolled down her face.

This was going to be hard for everyone, but it was our duty to help anyone we could. Most of the girls in front of us might have been beyond help, but if even one or two could stand up once more, I'd fight to assist them as much as I was able.

That would definitely be my atonement. The best way to atone for her death, the girl I couldn't save, who was killed by an orc because I pulled her arm and kept her from getting away, powerless to flee.

Tamaki boosted her sword expertise to Rank 8, and we returned to her original location.

TAMAKI	
LEVEL: 19	SWORDSMANSHIP: SKILL 7 → 8
STRENGTH: 1	SKILL POINTS: 9 → 1

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The memories of what followed were too painful to review. I took care of everything that needed to be done, without letting anyone else help—except Arisu with her Healing Magic. I even managed to get experience points from killing larva bees, which resulted in me leveling up during the process; although it wasn't as rewarding as killing orcs.

Out of all the girls who survived, only three remained sane and were determined to live on.

We had to leave the remains of all the other victims in the cave. Once we arrived back at the Cultural Arts Center, we used valuable oil to power the generator so we could have a shower. This was fortunate since there was an electric hot water system here instead of gas-powered one.

As the two hours passed, Arisu and Tamaki were allowed into the shower room first for refreshment. Then they stepped onto Kazu's prepared magical circle in the basement and disappeared without any hesitation about their destination.

Kazu should reward their loyalty even more than he already did.

Without waiting for the time of the transfer, I took a shower.

The hot water washed away all the bad memories. I'd already put my bloodied gym uniform in the wash and wiped away the blood from my skin, so I wasn't covered in blood when I stepped into the shower. Nonetheless, I felt it still on me. The intense stench, the horrible feeling of cutting open a human belly or slashing a throat, had traumatized me. Finally, the heat pouring down from above seemed like a great relief.

Besides, with the loud rush of water filling up the area, nobody would hear me sobbing.

Crying in public would cause others to doubt my commands. Feeling down would make everyone anxious. Therefore, I had to be strong and composed in front of others.

But not now. Just for now, I could just be me, not a leader.

The flowing water washed away not only the blood but also my emotions. It was a truly great magic.

It was wasting water, but I could let the summoners handle that part with their magic.

"I'm such an idiot. I should stop being so stubborn," I muttered, not even realize I'd voiced the words aloud. I bit my lip tightly. I put all my strength into the hand that was gripping my chest.

Pain was my salvation. As long as I had this pain, my heart wouldn't crumble.

"What an idiot," I muttered once more.

Afterword

Nice to meet you, I'm Tsukasa Yokotsuka. Since the page count for volumes one and two was tight, I was finally able to take the opportunity to write this afterword page for the first time in this third volume. However, it's difficult to know what to talk about when the story's content is a potential spoiler for upcoming developments.

Speaking of which, I'd like to address some changes between the web version and the book version. This work is a novelization of the same title published on the "Shousetsuka ni Narou" self-publishing website. In order to create more visually striking illustrations, the heroines' clothes, which were tracksuits in the web version, have become school gym uniforms in this book. It's understandable if you're wondering how effective that is as armor, but please consider it as an improvement in mobility. It's like in a certain anime where seven female warriors appear but wear light clothing despite being in a blizzard.

In addition, we made slight changes to some of the names and effects of certain spells, but we made no big changes to the actual story, so don't worry.

I originally wrote this story during breaks from playing a certain fleet-personification game to relax. When I received an offer for book publication just 20 days after the first posting, I murmured in front of my PC screen, "Do I really get to publish my story just like this?" Fortunately, the sales of volumes one and two have been doing well, and it seems that publication will continue in the future. I don't know how many volumes this will be, but I want to do my best with all my strength.

Although the tremendous power inflation in just three volumes may give the impression that it's gone too far, it will continue to inflate even more from here on out. Along with that, the stage will expand and the battles will get intense. Please look forward to Kazu-kun and his companions' continued battles.

Back Matter

Author: Tsukasa Yokotsuka While performing the duties of an admiral in a certain ship-girl development browser game, I started writing this story when I thought I'd like to post something on the "Shousetsuka ni Narou" self-publishing website, and here I am now! My admiral duties are currently on hold. (As of May 2015.)

Illustrator: Manyako (MANYAKO)

From Saga Prefecture, currently living in Tokyo. A freelance illustrator who mainly draws illustrations for books and games. (As of May 2015.)



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